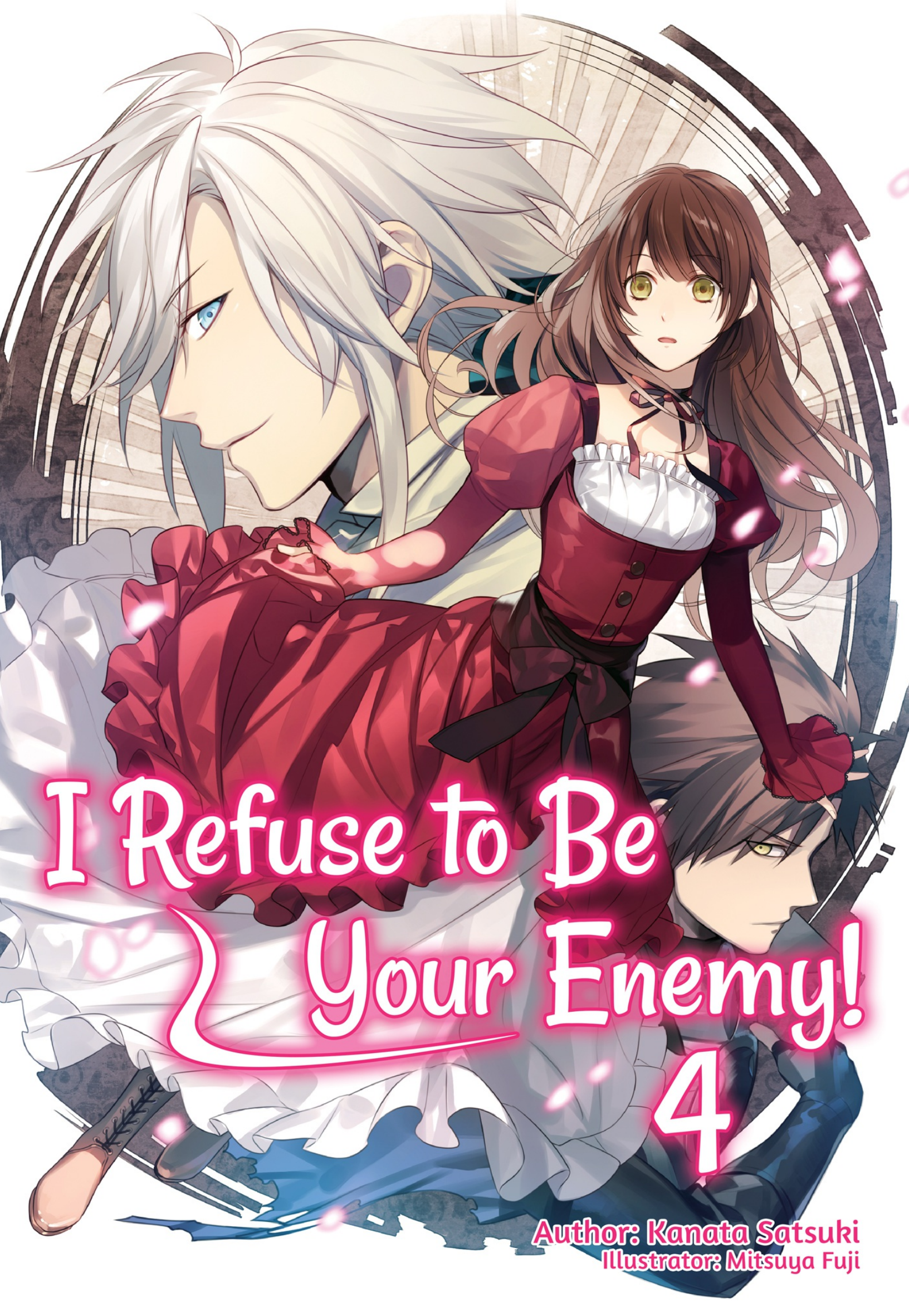




# I Refuse to Be Your Enemy!

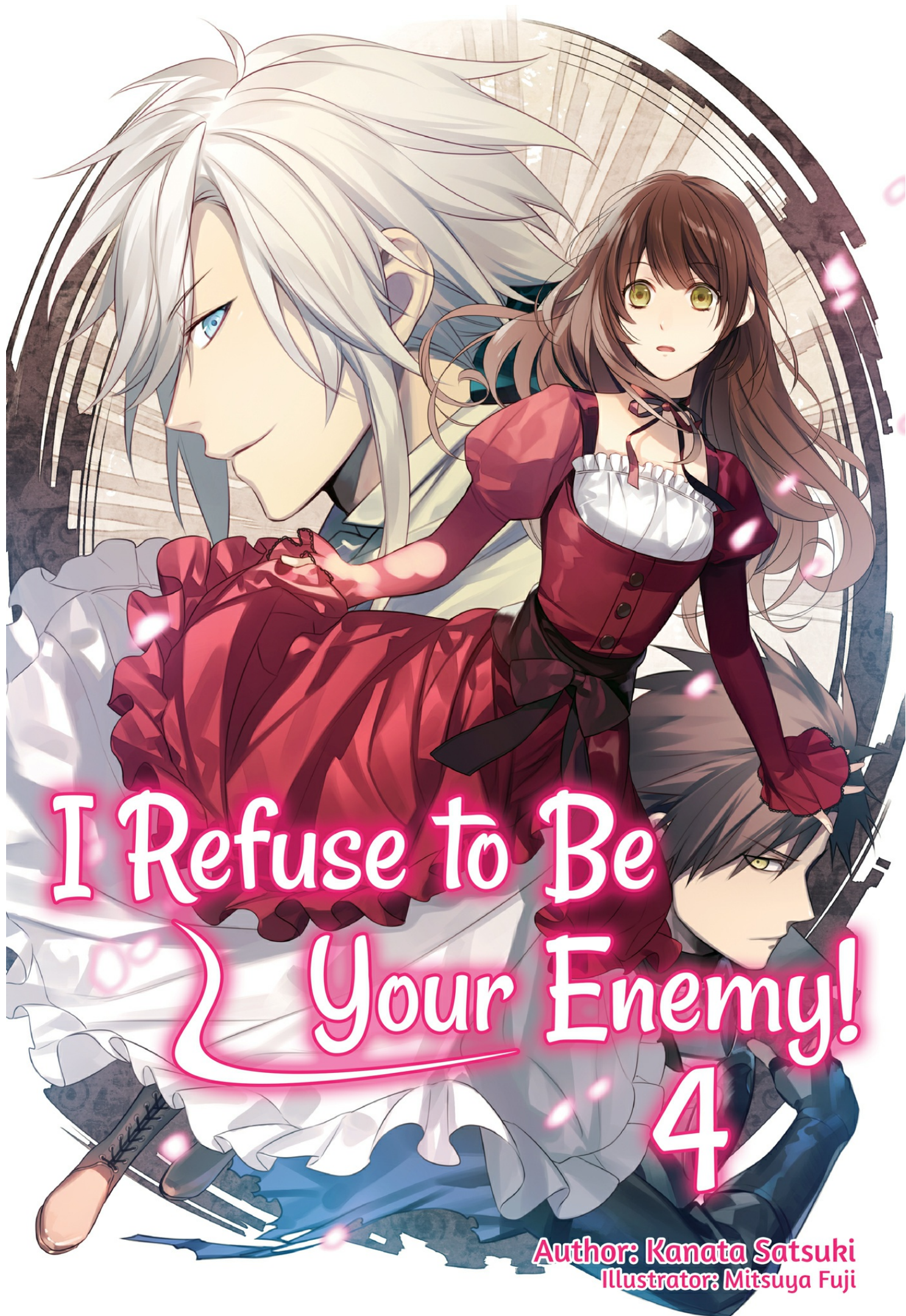
## 4

Author: Kanata Satsuki  
Illustrator: Mitsuya Fuji



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# Character Introductions



## Alan Évrard

The lively son of the margrave of Évrard, who manages the border between Farzia and Llewyrne. In the game from Kiara's past life, *Farzia: Kingdom at War*, he was the protagonist.



The resourceful prince of Farzia and the one leading the nation's forces against Llewyrne. In Kiara's past-life memories, he was slain before the start of the game.

## Reginald Dias Farzia (Reggie)



## Kiara Cordier

Our protagonist, an earth spellcaster. When she was about to be forced into marriage, she realized that she had been reincarnated into the world of a game she'd played in her past life—and that she was on the path to dying a villain—and fled. Currently, she is a spellcaster in Reggie's Farzian army, fighting against the enemy nation Llewyrne.



## Cain Wentworth

A calm and collected knight who has served Alan ever since he was a young boy. He also serves as Kiara's personal bodyguard. He lost his family in a war against Llewyrne.

## Horace

Kiara's spellcasting mentor. He used to be a wind spellcaster, as well as a bug-eyed, withered old man. He lost his life, but thanks to forming a mentor-disciple contract with Kiara, his soul was able to live on inside a Jomon clay figurine.







## The Farzian Royal Army

### Wayne Évrard

The margrave of Évrard. Alan's father.

### Groul

One of Reggie's knight-guards.

### Niven Azure

The portly marquis of Azure. Has a deafeningly loud voice.

### Emmeline Finard

The niece of the baron of Delphion. A valiant young woman who is perfectly willing to fight for herself.

### Henry Delphion

The baron of Delphion. After his wife and his niece, Emmeline, were taken captive, he switched allegiances to Llewynne.

### Girsch

A muscular mercenary with a mean sword arm. A woman at heart. The deputy leader and team mom of Gina's mercenary band.

### Lila, Reynard & Sara

A group of three pale, fox-like monsters called frostfoxes kept by Gina. They can use ice magic.

### Beatrice Lydia Évrard

Alan's mother, the wife of the margrave. Elder sister to the king of Farzia.

### Felix

One of Reggie's knight-guards.

### Faden Enister

The count of Enister. An old man with white hair and a beard to match. His trusty steed(?) is a giant white goat.

### Ernest Finard

Younger brother to the baron of Delphion. A poor military commander, but clear-sighted and skilled at information gathering. He leaves the fighting up to his daughter, Emmeline.

### Lucille Delphion

The only daughter of the baron of Delphion. Emmeline's cousin. She was nearly taken captive by Llewynne, but Emmeline helped her get away.

### Gina

A Salekhardian mercenary traveling with Kiara's group. A beast-tamer who employs the help of three frostfoxes.

## Llewynne's Co-Conspirators

### Marianne

Reggie's stepmother, the queen of Farzia. Born of Llewynne, she is aiding the Llewynian army's invasion of Farzia alongside the count of Patriciél.

### Ada Forsén

Queen Marianne's lady-in-waiting. She ran off in the heat of the moment, only to be taken in by the viscount of Credias and turned into a spellcaster.

### Viscount Credias

A Farzian nobleman who holds no territory of his own. His face is reminiscent of a bullfrog, and he is the man Kiara was originally supposed to marry. Spellcaster.

### Count Owen Patriciél

A Farzian nobleman, but one who has held close ties to Llewynne for quite some time. Enamored with Marianne, he has aided the Llewynian invasion in accordance with her wishes. Formerly Kiara's adoptive father.

## The Salekhardian Royal Army

### Mikhail

A lord-in-waiting from the Salekhardian royal palace. He works alongside Isaac.

### Isaac

The second prince of Salekhard who formed an alliance with Llewynne. He seized power by imprisoning his half-brother, Yefrem. Has approached Kiara under the guise of a merchant.









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## Chapter 1: A Formal Introduction and a Reunion with an Oddball

“I did NOT see that one coming.” Worn out from running, I braced myself against the stone wall, panting as I caught my breath.

We were currently west of Évrard—or more precisely, at Delphion’s Fort Inion, which we had just recaptured in order to save a group of hostages. Until a few minutes ago, I had been looking for Reggie because I had something to ask him; I wanted to know how he was going to deal with the ex-Delphion soldiers who had been working inside the fort.

I’d found Reggie in one of the towers. Cain, my bodyguard and a knight of Évrard, was there with him. The prince had been in the process of interrogating Cain about how he and I had jumped into action without any prior warning.

It was no surprise that Cain had gotten yelled at.

I did it because, at the time, I thought the captives were in danger of getting killed before we could go save them. If we had waited until after the Farzian army had broken down the gates and stormed the fort, it would have taken a good bit of time to reach them. In the meantime, there was the risk that the Llewynians would realize they were at a disadvantage and kill the girls.

However, if I had said I wanted to charge in alone, someone certainly would have objected. Cain likewise had come to the conclusion that our only option was to go ahead without notifying anyone—hence why we had stealthily charged in all by ourselves.

I assumed that Reggie had gone to *Cain* with his grievances simply because it had taken me forever to wake up, what with all the mana I’d used up during the battle. If that had been all they talked about, I would have cut into their conversation and explained that it wasn’t Cain’s fault.

However, when Cain asked why Reggie always tried to stop me from protecting him... I ran away without speaking a word to them. I was too scared

to hear Reggie's answer. It made me think of how Reggie had told me that in exchange for allowing me my freedom, I had to let him be free too, and I could feel my resolve wavering.

In the end, I missed my opportunity to ask what I'd wanted to know.

My shoulders sagging, I looked around to see where I was. Apparently, I'd wandered close to one of Fort Inion's fortified towers—the one where the hostages were staying. I wanted to know how they were doing, too, so I headed inside.

Before, I'd had the impression of it as a dark and dingy place where I couldn't make a sound, but today it was brimming with energy, and visitors abounded. Still, while I saw plenty of smiling faces among the crowd, some of the women were crying. More than likely, they'd just been informed of their families' passing.

For the record, living conditions in the tower weren't all that bad. Llewyrne didn't want the girls getting sick or dropping dead, for their part. The hostages had been provided with all the furniture and bedding they needed, so it served as a fine place for them to sleep.

When I climbed to the very top of the tower, I found a girl about my age with long, straight hair the color of black ash. It was Emmeline, the daughter of Lord Delphion's brother, Ernest. She had been held hostage here until just yesterday. Standing beside her was a little girl with dark-brown hair tied back with a green ribbon. That one was the baron's daughter, Lucille. The two cousins were sitting side by side on a bed, chatting.

I caught sight of them as soon as I reached the top of the stairs. There was a reason it was so easy to see inside the room: all the doors and walls of the corridor were made up of iron bars. Now that the Llewynians were gone, cloth had been draped over all the bars except the doors, but that still wasn't terribly secure. I wished I could take care of the issue myself, but the only walls I could make were stone. What we really needed up in here was a carpenter.

While I was absorbed in such thoughts, the girls spotted me.

"Oh, Lady Kiara!"



“Please, come in.”

After glancing in my direction, Emmeline stood up and walked over to me.

“As long as I’m not interrupting anything, sure. Sorry for dropping by without notice.”

“Not at all; I’m delighted you came by. We have yet to finish cleaning up after that battle, not to mention that all the soldiers here are men... I’ve been warned that it’s not safe for women to be wandering around, so I haven’t been able to leave the tower. But I wanted the opportunity to have a nice, long chat with you, so this works splendidly.”

“I wanted to talk to you, too! Watching you tell off that Llewynian soldier yesterday was absolutely fascinating.”

Emmeline had leveraged Farzia’s attack on the fort and attempted to strike a deal with a Llewynian soldier along the lines of *If you do as I say, I’ll put in a good word for you and see to your safe release*. It was a pretty effective threat, coming from a hostage.

Emmeline blinked at the word “fascinating,” and Lucille laughed. “See? I told you she wouldn’t be scandalized.”

“It looks like you were right, Lucille.” Judging by what they were saying, Emmeline’s actions had a tendency to put people off. Then, she went on to say something strange. “But then again, I knew you were that sort of girl.”

I didn’t quite understand what she was getting at, so Emmeline cut straight to the point. “As a matter of fact, you and I have met before, Miss Kiara Patriciél.”

Given that she was using my former last name, there was no question she knew who I was. But where on earth had we met? I had zero recollection of it.

“I’m not surprised you don’t remember. We never interacted much, and we were only there at the same time for about three months.”

“Where?”

“The boarding school in the southern royal domain—though I was one grade above you.”

“What?!”

I was so astonished that I didn't know what to say. But that checked out; of course she would recognize my face, and on the other hand, it also made sense that I wouldn't know about her.

"Why did you remember me, though?"

Frankly speaking, I had never done anything of note during my years as a student.

"You were such a strange girl! You doodled in your Bible during the services, remember?"

"Hrk..." I cupped my face in my hands and groaned. Shoot. The sermons had been so boring, I couldn't help drawing in the margins of the scripture.

"That reminds me! I heard from Lucille. My terramice flocked to you, didn't they? Quite impressive," Emmeline went on, delighted.

*Lucille! Why did you have to go and tell her that?!* I really wished she had kept quiet about that particular detail, but the cat was already out of the bag. Instead, I dared to ask, "Say, Miss Emmeline, how did you come up with the plan to breed terramice in the first place?"

Rearing a bunch of monsters wasn't an idea that would occur to your average noblewoman.

"It doesn't seem like something a daughter of nobility would do, does it? But as a matter of fact, it was all thanks to you."

"What?"

"You inspired me to use terramice to take care of the problem."

*What? Why? What did I do?* When I stared at her in wide-eyed wonder, Emmeline shyly averted her gaze. With a cute reaction like that, I could hardly believe she was the same person who had threatened those soldiers.

"You stuck in my memory because you were a strange girl, but if that was my sole impression of you, I wouldn't have come to respect you so much. Not long after I returned home from our boarding school, I was floored by the rumors I heard about you."

"What rumors?"



“Ones about your betrothal. I was shocked to my core! I had never imagined anyone would run away rather than be married. It was thanks to that, however, that I realized I was far from a free spirit. Both I and the people around me believed that we couldn’t or shouldn’t do certain things. We were nobles, after all.”

At the time, Emmeline had a suitor for her hand. The would-be groom was a young man from a Delphion branch family. Ernest had claimed that it wasn’t a bad deal, and Emmeline herself had believed her husband was meant to be decided by her father; thus, it didn’t matter if she herself couldn’t stand the man.

However, after hearing the rumors about me, she’d realized she didn’t have to take it lying down. Moreover, the terms of the engagement hadn’t been all that favorable. Emmeline had been convinced that she could find another man who would better serve their territory, so she’d told her father to leave the matter in her hands. She had sworn she would find a worthwhile partner, both for their land and for the province of Delphion as a whole.

Nonetheless, her prospective fiance had refused to back off. After brainstorming “an audacious plan to surpass even Kiara Patriciél,” her attention landed on some terramice that just happened to have been caught.

*But how did my story lead her to THAT?*

Any normal noblewoman would have just negotiated with her father to pick a different man. As I’d assumed, Emmeline had to have been a pretty eccentric girl from the get-go.

“Oh, but you’re always so full of surprises! I never would have imagined you were fighting as a spellcaster.”

“Well, it’s not something most people would do...”

I had become a spellcaster because I’d been positive I could do it, but even a commoner wouldn’t consider the path of sorcery unless her life was in immediate danger.

“But isn’t that what makes you so intriguing? You’re not you if you aren’t fighting.”

“Huh?”

*I'm not me... if I'm not fighting?*

I stared at her blankly. I hadn't expected her to say that at all.

Seeing my reaction, Emmeline elaborated on what she meant. “Raising your sword in rebellion isn't the only way to fight. Sometimes running away is the same as struggling against your lot in life.”

When she put it like that, it finally made sense. The possibility that I would lead the miserable life of a villain, and the possibility that Reggie and Lord Évrard would die—I had taken action to escape from those fates.

*I see. So running can be another means of fighting.*

“By the way, I was hoping to talk to you about the days to come,” Emmeline went on. “None of us are in any position to return home yet, given the current situation. It would be a waste to simply sit around being protected in the meantime, so I was wondering if there was something we could do to help.”

“Hmm... We probably don't have enough people on hand to treat all the wounded.”

We were sure to be fighting Llewyne again soon. We would need all the manpower we could get.

Then, Emmeline said something strange. “Do you have enough people to look after His Highness?”

*Enough people to look after Reggie?* I gave a puzzled tilt of my head. There wasn't much time to relax on the front, so there weren't that many things he needed help with. In fact, having a lady-in-waiting around seemed likely to get in the way of our march more than anything else. I figured Emmeline would have known as much, so I was surprised by the question... but it turned out it was someone else's proposal.

“I'm not asking for myself. I have every intention of joining the ranks of your archers. Do you remember the girl from yesterday who was about to be used as a hostage? Her name is Ada. She was in low spirits, what with the precarious situation she was in, but she bounced back the moment she saw His Highness'



face, declaring that she wanted to stand by his side.”

That brunette lady—the one who had been restrained by a soldier yesterday—was called Ada, apparently. Emmeline explained that she had been brought in from Trisphede as a hostage.

I certainly did feel sorry for her, and if it would give her the motivation to work hard, I wasn’t necessarily opposed. That said, it wasn’t a matter I had any particular say in. How was I to broach the topic with Reggie?

“If it’s too much trouble, you can just say no, Lady Kiara,” Lucille commented when she noticed my conflicted expression.

“Hmm... To be honest with you, Reggie has all his needs taken care of by his lord-in-waiting. Besides, he prefers to do most things for himself,” I answered, explaining why I didn’t think it was necessary.

“Oh!”

“My.”

Emmeline and Lucille exchanged glances, hiding their mouths behind the tips of their fingers. *Err, what did I say?*

“You refer to His Highness by a nickname? Interesting.”

“Ack! Oh nooo...”

Emmeline called attention to my slip of the tongue. I had called him “Reggie” out of habit; of course they were going to jump to some conclusions.

“Wait, it’s not like *that*!”

“Hm? I didn’t say anything.” Emmeline played dumb.

“You two must be very close,” Lucille remarked with all the bluntness children are known for.

We were good friends, sure, but the word “close” sounded like it could have other implications.

“He’s like a guardian to me! That’s all!”

“The prince is your guardian? I’d love to hear how *that* came to be.”

Emmeline's eyes shone with the glint of a predator cornering her prey. I prepared to make a run for it.

"Try not to give her too hard a time. She's my army's most valuable spellcaster." Did that new voice count as throwing me a lifeline or dropping a bomb?

Emmeline and Lucille stood up, then dropped to one knee and bowed their heads in respect as Reggie came up the stairs alongside Groul. "You have our deepest thanks for coming all this way, Your Highness."

Meanwhile, I slid into the background. It wasn't that long ago that I had overheard Reggie and Cain's conversation. Luckily, it didn't seem like Reggie had ever noticed me there, but that didn't make this any less awkward.

That was when I noticed one other person standing even farther behind Groul, who was waiting behind Reggie.

It was the very Ada we had just been talking about. A woman best described as a classic beauty, her brown hair was tied up in a bun, and she was gazing at Reggie with sheer passion in her eyes. One look at her face made it clear that she felt something for Reggie—or to take it a step further, that she was in love with him.

I felt a prick of pain somewhere in the depths of my heart.

At the same time, I couldn't help getting distracted by the stone hanging around Ada's neck. That had to be a contract stone... but where had she gotten one from?

My imagination went to a dark place. Could it be she had some sort of connection to a mage? As far as I'd heard, the only other spellcaster in Farzia was Lord Credias, but there was no reason for an ally of the viscount's to be taken prisoner. He was, after all, on the side of our enemy—the queen. The Llewynians ought to have welcomed any friend of his with open arms.

In that case, was she just walking around wearing a pretty gem without knowing what it really was? I wanted to ask, but I wasn't sure how to bring it up.

Once they had said their greetings, Reggie instructed Emmeline to rise to her

feet. He then told her, “It’s just as Kiara said. I don’t need anyone new to look after me. Besides, we’ll be marching on the royal capital before winter comes, so we’re bound to be traveling all over the place.”

After politely declining Emmeline’s request, Reggie took a few steps forward, placed a hand on my shoulder, and brought his lips close to my ear.

“Let’s have a chat about what you did yesterday in a bit, Kiara.”

That hit me where it hurt. Upon delivering that warning, Reggie took his leave, never sparing Ada so much as a glance.

Naturally, Ada’s gaze shifted to me. *Yikes. I think she just locked on to her target.*

To make matters worse, Lucille chose that moment to make things weird. “I see His Highness refers to you without title, too. Yet he always calls my cousin here ‘Lady Emmeline.’”

“Uh, remember what I said? He’s like my guardian!”

“And *why* is he your guardian again?” Emmeline demanded.

That was when Ada suddenly spoke up. “I’d be interested in hearing that story myself. May I intrude upon your conversation?”

I caught myself staring long and hard at Ada’s face. This wasn’t our first encounter, but it *was* our first conversation. Did I need to introduce myself?

While I was busy with my internal debate, Emmeline cut in. “Ada, this is our spellcaster, Kiara. Come, introduce yourself,” she urged.

Ada gave her a nod. “My name is Ada. I come from a branch family of the House of Trisphede. You have my thanks for rescuing me yesterday, Lady Kiara.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Kiara Cordier, Évrard’s spellcaster.”

“Cordier?” Emmeline raised a voice of skepticism.

*Oh right, I never did finish telling her that story.*

“Erm, I’m now officially a relative of the House of Évrard.”

While omitting and abridging various parts, I told the story of how Reggie had come to be my caretaker. Of course, I couldn’t mention that I had stowed away



on a carriage belonging to the House of Évrard. Mentioning that I had been chased down by someone from the House of Patriciél was fine, but I couldn't touch on anything magic-related, and I didn't want to bring up the Forest of the Thorn Princess either. In the end, it turned into a very bowdlerized version of the actual story, but Emmeline was still plenty amazed.

"It must have been quite reassuring to have the backing of a prince."

"Definitely. It's all thanks to him that I managed to find work," I replied, laughing and nodding.

Ada, however, took my story in with a perplexed look. "Having work means being treated as a commoner. You started out as the daughter of a count... Wasn't that upsetting to you?"

Branch family or not, there were many of the opinion that being on the fringes of nobility made them all the more privileged. The members of the Évrard branch families were like that, too. Hence why Ada perceived it as me lowering myself to the rank of commoner.

"My original plan was to live a commoner's life off in a corner of the town, so it didn't really bother me."

Ada's eyes widened. "How... unusual."

With that, everyone finally accepted why the prince had become my guardian.

Since this seemed like a good opportunity, I took the chance to ask about Ada's necklace. I mentioned that it was a strangely colored stone and asked where it had been made, and Ada answered that it was a keepsake from her mother, so she didn't know.

Emmeline piggybacked off our conversation to touch the rare gem, and I brushed my own fingertips over it, too. It was definitely a contract stone. It looked a lot like a jewel, so it wasn't a huge surprise that people might wear one as an accessory.

Once that was confirmed, I took my leave before I could be subjected to any more interrogations.

My next destination lay outside the fort. I had to perform the burials I hadn't gotten around to the previous day.

When I exited the walls of the fort, I found the bodies of soldiers arranged over the ground, divided up into enemies and allies. Upon closer inspection, I saw that the enemy corpses had been thrown into a haphazard pile. Several soldiers were standing around nearby, working to sort the bodies and collect any personal effects.

In the distance, I could see a small group of cavalry and foot soldiers heading back here, rounding a corner of the fort wall. Lord Azure had returned from patrolling the area, searching for any enemies in the area as he did. The marquis, who had flaxen hair and the build of an opera singer, was belting a tune at a dreadfully high volume. Everyone from his territory was in the habit of bursting into extraordinarily loud song, apparently.

Master Horace muttered, disgruntled, "Can't say he seems suited to scouting."

"Well, if he *does* see anything, that voice of his can relay the information faster than anyone else," I countered, then called out to the soldiers near the rows of bodies.

Relief washed over them when they spotted me walking toward them. Since there was no telling when the Llewynians would attack next, they didn't have time to do anything more than toss some dirt over the bodies and leave them there. Unfortunately, if they didn't bury the corpses deeper under the earth, wild dogs and crows were bound to come dig them up. Everyone preferred the idea of a proper burial, so my arrival was considered more than welcome.

Once I had magically buried the bodies of our allies under the soil, the soldiers joined me in reciting the funeral scripture.

Then, just as I was heading over to where the enemy corpses were stacked, I heard a woman's pleas.

"P-Please, I beg of you! Let me have this! Just this one trinket!"

When I took a closer look, I saw Lord Azure and a dozen accompanying soldiers standing near our fallen enemies. Nearby, a middle-aged woman was

clinging to one of the soldiers.

*Oh no*, I thought.

She had to be the bereaved family member of one of the Delphion soldiers lying among those corpses. If the branch houses governing the surrounding areas had sided with Llewyrne, it meant their private armies had been given no choice but to fight alongside the Llewynians. Most likely, she was someone who had come to collect a memento of her departed family. Since his cape was dyed black, his body had been thrown in with the rest of the Llewynians.

I was on the verge of taking a step forward.

“Don’t bother, little disciple.” Inferring what I was about to do, Master Horace tried to stop me.

“But Master Horace! It’s just a memento of someone who’s already passed away. What’s the big deal?”

I didn’t see the need to lay such strict restrictions upon someone who was already dead and thus could never hold a sword against us again. All his equipment and money had already been confiscated as well.

“You may get special treatment as the spellcaster, but I still wouldn’t recommend turning your own allies against you.”

“But who’s going to say something if not me? Nobody else has that kind of sway!”

Your average soldier was in no position to request leniency for his fellow countrymen-turned-enemies. After all, as the lord of his own domain, Lord Azure was the one with the jurisdiction here. Anyone who incurred his displeasure was liable to be framed for a crime and cast away as a felon.

Moreover, they could justify themselves by saying that these men were enemies of the marquis. I’d heard numerous complaints about my burials for that very reason—though it seemed like the critics were largely appeased by Reggie’s explanation.

Still, there had once been a chance that I could become an enemy. The only difference between us was whether we’d taken that first step or not. Was there



anyone who *could* take that step if it put their life and the lives of their family on the line? All I'd had to worry about was myself, and that was the only reason I'd thrown everything else away to find a path to survival.

This time, I took that step forward. Master Horace sighed, but I just muttered an apology.

The middle-aged woman was reaching for something one of Lord Azure's men had confiscated—a pendant. It was made of wood, probably a sign of poverty.

"Lord Azure."

He turned toward me as I approached. "Oh, if it isn't our Lady Spellcaster! Is something—"

"I've come to bury these bodies," I announced, sprinkling copper ore around the corpses. "Could I please have the pendant belonging to that soldier?"

He hesitated. "Yes, I've heard that you bury even our enemies as a means of preventing the plague. And that it was His Highness' initiative."

"Yes, precisely."

For lack of other options, Lord Azure motioned for his soldier to hand me the pendant. The woman cried out in despair and started sobbing.

Once I was holding the pendant, I kneeled down and placed both hands on the ground. "Stand back, please."

The men hastily distanced themselves from the corpses. The two soldiers who had accompanied me here grabbed the crying woman and dragged her away from the marquis.

I buried all the bodies in one go. Upon witnessing the corpses sinking under the earth in the blink of an eye, the woman was left astounded. I then walked up to her, slipping the pendant into her hand. She stared down at it with an almost disbelieving look.

"Go on now," I urged her. She stood up and started walking off.

A bewildered expression on his face, Lord Azure glanced back and forth between me and the retreating woman. "Lady Spellcaster?! That was an enemy —"

“The enemy has been buried. Who’s to say who took what from where? So long as you keep quiet about it, it’ll be like this never happened.”

“I couldn’t do that! As His Highness’ retainer, I can’t overlook such a grievous transgression!”

“Don’t worry about it. No matter how many times you stab a dead body, it won’t serve to protect anyone, nor will it help take down our enemy. It won’t bring back any lost lives, either. All I did was take a belonging from a rotting soldier and hand it to his kin,” I responded.

Lord Azure’s eyes darted this way and that, as if he couldn’t believe what I was saying. “No, you see... It may be true that corpses can no longer stand and fight, yes... but some of our men might be dead because these cretins turned against us!”

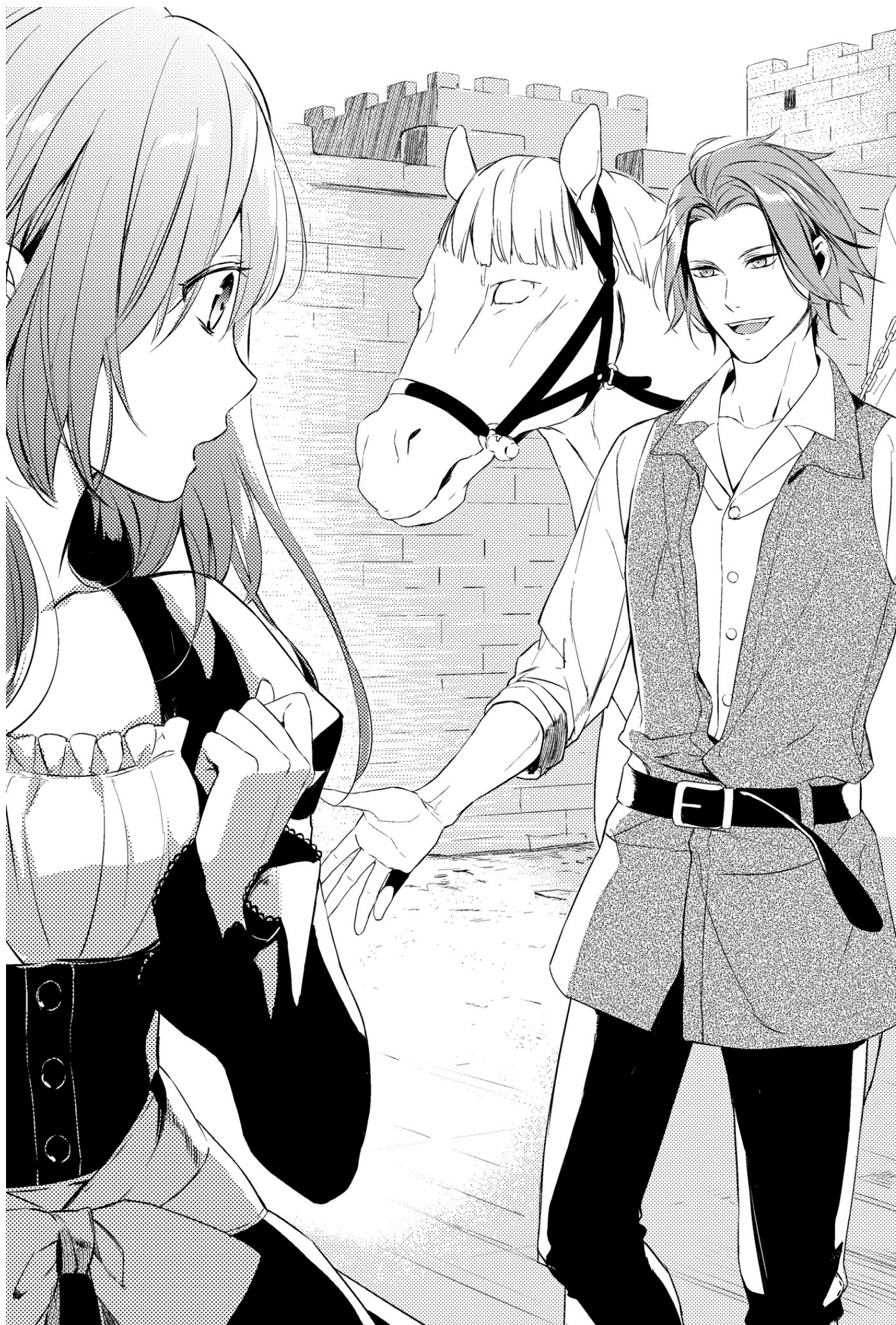
“Isn’t that grudge better directed toward our enemies who still live? Besides, these men are originally of Delphion... of Farzia. They only fell in line with Llewyne to protect their homes and families. If they hadn’t been invaded, none of this would have happened.”

Lord Azure’s jaw dropped. He probably couldn’t comprehend my philosophy. I knew full well that I couldn’t overturn customs built up over years and years with just a few pretty words, so that was fine by me. All I wanted was for him to turn a blind eye.

That was when someone else cut in.

“Hmm, what’s this now? Were the enemies already buried? That’s too bad. I was hoping to pick up a few things I could sell.”

I was pretty sure I recognized that easygoing voice. When I turned around, I saw a horse-drawn cart and a tall, cheerful man with a familiar face approaching.



*I'm pretty sure he used to have red hair. Why is it brown today?*

"Please, Your Lordship, leave a little something for us merchants to scrape together! Surely you must understand the plight of us common folk? Some villages have found ourselves in a real pickle—invaded, our fields ravaged!"

No doubt about it. The man rubbing his hands together as he walked over to us was definitely Isaac. He was the same merchant who had chatted with me after I'd absconded from Cassia Castle.

I nearly muttered his name out loud, but before I could, Lord Azure gave his own unimpressed response. "The military has a right to all the possessions of our fallen enemies. All their weapons and money would have been gone by the time you got there. You may as well forget about it."

"Oh? What a shame." Isaac sagged with disappointment.

Lord Azure gave a dismissive snort, then turned back to me. "Compared to merchants swarming the corpses, handing over mementos no longer seems quite as egregious. Good day to you, Lady Spellcaster."

With that, he took his soldiers and retreated into the fort. The soldiers who had accompanied me likewise returned to the gates now that all the bodies were taken care of. One of them dipped his head in a grateful bow as he left.

Perhaps he had been born in Delphion. He'd been watching the woman with pity in his eyes, so he was probably glad that I'd at least let her keep a memento.

"All's well that ends well, eh?" Master Horace commented.

"Yeah."

As I smiled down at Master Horace, I heard a surprised cry from nearby. When I looked back up, I saw Isaac pointing at Master Horace, his finger quivering.

"D-D-Did that doll just talk?! Don't tell me it's cursed!"

"No, it's fine. This is just my mentor."

"Your what?!"



“The soul of my mentor lives inside this doll. Circumstances thrust him into this form, but he used to be human.”

“Then he’s a ghost?!”

*Wow, it’s been a long time since anyone’s reacted this way,* I thought. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“This is no laughing matter, little disciple! Don’t let people treat your poor mentor like some kind of horror story!”

“I mean, you *are* the kind of character who shows up in a scary story.” If Master Horace were to wander the fort by himself in the middle of the night, I was sure the place would be buzzing with ghost stories the next day. “Plus, Isaac’s not wrong. You’re technically a ghost on the inside.”

There was no denying it.

I looked up at Isaac. “Um... Isaac? That *is* you, right? Your hair looks different.”

“What, this? Yes, well... I have my reasons.”

Going by that answer, I guessed he’d dyed it. He caught a lock of his hair between his fingertips and laughed. He’d clearly been going in and out of the fort in his carriage, so maybe there was someone inside whom he didn’t want to recognize him.

“Still,” Isaac started, then paused to glance at where I’d just buried the enemy soldiers. “I’d heard the rumors, but I see you really *have* been going around doing this.”

“Err, what rumors?”

*Don’t tell me I’m notorious for burying my enemies now!*

“Évrard’s spellcaster extends the courtesy of a burial even to her enemies—ostensibly to stave off illness, but unfathomably enough, she doesn’t distinguish between enemy and ally whatsoever. Of course, since it’s the doing of a spellcaster, there *are* suspicions that the funeral is a facade, and in reality you’re performing some sort of sacrifice to the devil.”

“A sacrifice? Really?”

*Why would I need something like that?* Still, the rumors weren't quite as bad as I had feared.

Master Horace seemed to think that was a real hoot. He was laughing, "Ohoho! A sacrifice to the devil, eh? Eeeheehee!"

Isaac shot him a disturbed look. "Looking at that doll of yours lends some credibility to the theory."

Okay, that was fair. I'd be surprised, too, if I were faced with a talking doll out of nowhere. Even I'd thought he looked creepy when I first made him. By now, I thought he had his own special brand of charm, though.

"Well, I suppose if you're carrying that uncanny thing around, no one would think to antagonize you. I intervened because I saw a lone girl surrounded by a group of old men—was that uncalled for?"

"No, you really helped me out there. Thanks."

Evidently, Isaac had cut in because he'd worried I was in trouble. When I thanked him, he awkwardly averted his gaze. "Err... That is, I thought it would be rude to pass you by when we were already acquainted, so I came to say hello. I'm glad to hear I could be of service."

From the looks of it, he was the type to get flustered in the face of genuine praise. It was kind of cute.

"But you really *do* bury the bodies of your enemies, hm? I see."

"Is that weird?" I started to get a little antsy.

"Weird? Probably, sure. But I don't think there's anything wrong with showing respect to those whom you fought to the death fair and square."

Surprised to hear this fresh perspective, I stared long and hard at Isaac.

"Skirmishes are quite commonplace in my homeland. But if you can't band together with your fellow neighbors, you'll be annihilated the moment you're invaded, right? Thus, the feud with your opponent is over when the match is decided. Holding grudges goes against our policy." A distant look in his eyes, Isaac went on, "Besides, it's not as though those grunts are the ones who called for an invasion. If it would serve in place of paying taxes, plenty of men would

enlist for the sakes of their families. And in the end, they paid the price of razing another man's fields with their own lives."

That reminded me of something Reggie had once said. He had claimed that *he* was the one who bore responsibility. It sounded like Isaac was saying more or less the same thing.

As I fell deep into thought, Isaac suddenly held out a bag, saying, "Oh, right. You like this sort of thing, don't you?"

When I took it out of his hand, I found cookies inside.

"What's this for?"

"There's nothing like sweets to give you back your energy. You can have it."

"Thank you!"

I was about to pop one into my mouth when I remembered that I'd just stuck my hands into the soil. Noticing that, Isaac asked, "Shall I feed it to you?"

"Yes please! I want to try one!" I badgered.

"Alright, alright," he responded, holding out a cookie. He immediately came to his senses, making a face that screamed, *Oh crap*, but it was too late. I had already snapped the cookie out of his fingers.

The fragrant scent and sweet taste of butter and flour spread through my mouth, filling me with bliss. Master Horace was chortling in the background, but I valiantly ignored him, munching on the cookie with a big smile on my face. Isaac looked off to the side, covering his face with one hand.

What was he so embarrassed about? I had no idea.

Once I was done enjoying my cookie, he asked an odd question to play off his shyness. "Oh, that's right. When you captured this fort, did you happen to see a Llewynian spellcaster here?"

"What? A spellcaster?"

"I heard rumors along those lines... but perhaps they were fake." Isaac flapped a hand dismissively, asking me to forget about it.

Maybe rumors of the defective spellcasters thrown into the fray had been

exaggerated.

Apparently, the brief change of topic had given Isaac time to compose himself. “Whatever the case, I’m glad to see you’re having a better time of it,” he said, casting me a gentle look.

He was probably thinking back to how I had cried because I was scared of killing.

“I don’t understand why you’re still torturing yourself, but at least that’s something. If you were still as upset as you were back then, I was planning to ask if you wanted to run away with me.”

*Run away.* I found myself entirely disenchanted with the words. After all, I had no desire to leave this place. If I couldn’t protect these people, I wouldn’t be myself anymore.

“Thanks, but I have something to protect.”

“A person?” Isaac looked a little crestfallen.

*What a softie,* I thought with a laugh.

“Yes. People who are like family to me. They told me I didn’t have to fight, so I was feeling stuck for a while. If I don’t fight, however, there’s a chance they might be killed.”

“Are they weak?”

Evidently, he assumed I was so set on protecting them because they couldn’t defend themselves.

“No, I think they’re strong. And I’m not just talking about their skill with a sword. They know exactly what they need to do, and they never get scared like I do.”

Reggie, Cain, and Alan were all like that. So were Gina and her frostfoxes.

“Are you talking about someone you love?”

“They’re all very important to me,” I replied. There wasn’t a single one of them I wanted to lose, after all.

However, Isaac just frowned. “But you’re no all-loving altruist, are you? If you



were, you would have chosen your words differently when you were speaking to that nobleman.”

“What? No, I wouldn’t call myself altruistic.”

Fighting for *everyone* would be more than I could handle. Just protecting the people I knew was already hard enough; I’d wind up burning myself out.

“What inspired you to fight? It’s usually for the sake of one specific person, right?”

“What inspired me?” I parroted.

The reason I was so convinced I had to fight as a spellcaster was because I had remembered the deaths of Reggie and Lord Évrard.

“There’s someone I owe a lot to, and I thought he might die.”

“You’re putting your life on the scales against his. He has to be more than a simple benefactor.”

Isaac’s sudden interrogation threw me for a loop. Was it that weird to risk your life for someone who’d supported you?

“If I were in your shoes, I’d do it for my family and no one else. If it’s not someone I’d be willing to trade my life for, why put everything on the line?”

At that, Isaac abruptly waved and returned to his carriage.

“Looks like someone is here to pick you up. See you around.”

Just as he said, someone was walking over from the gates.

“Oh, Reggie!”

There weren’t many people with silver hair; plus, he had a knight with him. I assumed Isaac had taken his leave because he didn’t want to tangle with the prince.

Still, what was our commander-in-chief doing outside the fort with only one knight-guard in tow? I had faith in Felix’s skills, but that seemed like too big a responsibility for him to shoulder alone.

Once Reggie got close enough, I lightly chided him. “Reggie, it’s too dangerous for you to be out here.”

“I ought to be saying that to you. I came to tell you to head back inside,” Reggie shot back, flashing me a smile more beautiful than any woman’s. “Who was that man, anyway? He looked like a merchant. Do you know him?”

“Yeah. He came to see if he could sell some enemy belongings, since it’s not like they can use them anymore.”

I wasn’t lying... technically. For some reason, I felt compelled to hide the whole truth, so that was the answer I gave him.



“Drat. I never did manage to find that spellcaster, and with all the men from Évrard on high alert, I wasn’t going to have much luck sneaking around. It really is a shame we didn’t root them out while Llewyne had the place under control,” Isaac griped from the box seat of his wagon once he had put enough distance between himself and the fort. “It’s good that I ran into our little miss spellcaster, though. I’d assumed I would have a hard time finding her, seeing as I couldn’t hang about inside the fort. But it seems she really didn’t know anything about it, so perhaps Vasily was fed some bad intel.”

“We knew there was a chance we might come up empty-handed. That aside, you better have taken the opportunity to examine the inside of the fort.” Sitting next to him in the driver’s seat was the blond boy, Mikhail. From his perfunctory tone, one would never have guessed that he was the king’s lord-in-waiting.

Unfazed, Isaac wore a look of pride as he responded, “Of course. And from that, I learned just how difficult it would be for us to launch an assault. A run-of-the-mill siege would be one thing, but they’ve got Kiara on their side.”

“You’re quite lily-livered for a man who usurped the throne. What will you do, then?”

“Don’t be in such a rush; I’m thinking about it. I’ll make sure to get one or two wins under my belt by you-know-when. But still... fighting against an acquaintance really makes you think.”

“You got attached, I see. You *did* seem to be enjoying yourself quite a bit.” Mikhail furrowed his brow.

“You know how it goes. Nothing endears a pet to you quite like watching it light up after you give it a treat, right? But when you’re going to war—a war you have to win—you have no choice but to fight.”

“There’s no problem so long as you’ve made up your mind about it... and you haven’t forgotten your promise.”

“I wouldn’t go back on my word after I’ve made you all but stab my brother in the back. I know our only option is to fight Farzia.”

“I’m relieved to hear you haven’t been swayed.”

While Mikhail faced forward, gripping the reins, Isaac looked back at the fort and said flatly, “Of course.”

In the distance, he could see her tiny figure retreating into the gates. If she had said she was still having a hard time, he’d planned to help her escape. After all, the next time he crossed paths with her as the king of Salekhard, he wouldn’t have the option of sparing her.

Whenever that happened, there was just as good a chance he would have to kill the people who were important to her. *She’ll probably end up hating me*, Isaac told himself.



“Would you care for a cookie, Your Highness?”

The thought suddenly struck me as we were walking back into the fort together, and I held out the bag of cookies. Since there were other soldiers around, I was careful to address him formally.

Felix panicked. “Pardon me, but the prince shouldn’t be eating something provided by a stranger!”

“Oh, my apologies. I already ate one earlier, so I’m pretty sure it’s safe.”

“You did?! Err, nonetheless, we still have to follow standard procedure. Would you mind lending me the bag for a moment?” With that, Felix waved over a soldier who was walking back from the stables. “Hey, Percy!”

The man Felix called out to was a cavalryman of the same age, give or take. He rushed over, but seeing as Reggie was hanging around, he seemed anxious

as to why he'd been summoned.

"You were envious of Lord Alan's birthday cake, no? I'll spare you five of these." Felix handed the cavalryman named Percy a few cookies.

When Felix asked him how they tasted, the slightly baby-faced Percy stuffed his cheeks, beaming with delight.

"I's del'cious!"

"Glad to hear it. You can go now."

"Sanks!"

Clutching the remaining cookies firmly in his hand, Percy ran off to his friends. As he watched him go, Felix nodded to himself. "You're right. Doesn't look like we have to worry about any fast-acting poison."

"Um..."

"I'm just taking precautions. There was a chance you just happened to pick out one that wasn't poisoned."

Apparently, Felix had used him as an impromptu poison tester.

"Not happy to see someone used as a poison test right before your eyes?" Reggie presumed when he noticed my dubious expression.

"I understand why he had to do it, but still..."

I knew Felix had only done it just in case, but I didn't feel great watching someone get used as a guinea pig, completely oblivious to what was going on.

"You knew it would be fine, didn't you?"

"I mean, yes..."

Reggie smiled and said, "Felix knew that, too; he just carried out his duty as a precaution. That was something of a ritual, more or less. Otherwise, he'd never do something as heinous as feed poison to an unsuspecting cavalryman. Putting that aside, where did you meet that merchant from before?"

"Erm... Back in Cassia. He gave me some candy when I went out on the town with Gina."



That wasn't *wrong*, exactly. I had walked back with Gina. I just left out the part where I'd met Isaac after bolting from the castle.

"Really now, Kiara? You let someone lure you with food?"

*Grr. Does he think I'm that easy to bait?*

"No. I'll accept whatever someone gives me, but I wouldn't go off with them for it."

*Even I know better than to run off with strangers who offer you candy! The candy itself isn't the problem, though, and that sugary treat of his was delicious. Also, excuse me, I'm not a kid!*

Still, I was a little flustered to know he was worried about me. It was a nice feeling.

"In that case, why don't you take your spoils and join me for a break?" Reggie then added a confusing remark about how this was a good opportunity.

I figured I wouldn't get in his way if he was just taking a breather, so I decided to take him up on his offer. After passing through the gates of the inner fort, we cut through the courtyard and headed for the main tower.

The fort commander's living quarters were located in the main tower. Thus, Reggie and his knights occupied the third floor, and I was staying on the second. Once we entered Reggie's room, his lord-in-waiting, Colin, left for the kitchen to go make tea. After Reggie ordered him to take care of some business, Felix likewise stepped out of the room.

There was nothing inside but a simple wooden table and chairs. The little wooden door of the stone-framed window had been left open, carrying in the sounds from outside. If it were daytime, we would have heard the clangs of sword training and the enthused shouts of soldiers, but now that evening had fallen, it was perfectly quiet out there.

"The last time I sat across from you in a quiet, empty room like this... must have been in the archives of Évrard." Reggie gazed out the window.

"Of course, we couldn't hear much of a breeze in there, but I remember flipping through our books until Mabel came to get us. I'm pretty sure that was

the hardest I've ever studied—and I'm including school!" Now that I was alone with Reggie, I didn't have to choose my words as carefully. Similar to whenever I could discard all decorum and slump over in my chair, it felt like I could finally breathe again. "Is Mabel doing okay, by the way? Oh, I guess you wouldn't know where she is..."

The elderly Mabel was Reggie's attendant, but she had been staying at the royal palace ever since the war broke out.

"Not so. Didn't I mention that the servants of the castle fled when the queen ushered in the Llewynian troops? Apparently, she managed to escape by slipping into the crowds of lower-ranked servants. Sorry, I suppose I should have told you. I do appreciate you worrying about her." Reggie looked over at me and smiled.

"No, don't worry about it! You must have been relieved to hear she was okay, too. That's great news."

"It is. Mabel's always been like a mother to me."

"Your real mother passed away when you were little, right? I'm sure she was lovely."

Given how handsome Reggie was, his mother had to have been a knockout beauty. His father must have been good-looking too if the man's big sister, Beatrice, was any indication.

"She was a perfectly average person. Of course, my grandfather always said he couldn't stand the sight of her. Consequently, we don't have any portraits or what have you to remember her by."

"She didn't get along with your grandfather?"

"My grandfather was a perfectionist, and my father did too well for himself. That's probably what left the current king... my late uncle with so many complexes."

I was suddenly reminded that Reggie had lost a family member just the other day.

"Um... I'm sorry for your loss."

“There’s no need to be; I can’t say it feels like much of one. I’m more annoyed with him than anything. If he was going to marry an enemy nation’s princess to keep the peace, he ought to have at least kept a closer eye on her.”

“That’s fair. If someone told me my stepmother had passed away, I doubt I’d have much to say on the matter.”

It was a terrible thing to say, but I couldn’t help the way I felt. Of course, the only one who I could actually come out and *tell* that to was Reggie, who I knew understood the feeling.

Yeah. I was no all-loving altruist. If it was a stranger, then... enemy or not, I could still sympathize with them, knowing that there was someone out there who would be sad if they died. But when it came to someone who had hurt me personally, I just couldn’t feel the same way.

*Isaac seemed kind of worried about that, though.*

As I was thinking back on what Isaac had said to me, Reggie murmured, “Is Wentworth treating you well?”

“Huh?”

Reggie’s question brought to mind his conversation with Cain up in the fort tower. Cain had taken my side in the argument. Was Reggie asking that because he knew the knight had committed to being my full-fledged ally?

“Erm, yeah.” After some hesitation, I nodded.

Cain was always kind to me—no question there. He helped me with whatever I wanted to do and protected me from danger. Some aspects of his motivation were a little bit frightening, but our wishes were aligned where Llewyn was concerned, so it worked out alright.

“He’d protect you with his life, so don’t do anything too crazy. It would be hard on you if something were to happen to him, wouldn’t it?”

“Sure...”

I had no idea why Reggie was suddenly telling me this. Somehow, he wasn’t acting like himself.

Just as a mysterious sense of anxiety gripped my heart, someone opened the

door. Colin had returned, holding a tray with a tea set, and for some reason, he had brought Emmeline along with him.

“I’ve come in response to your summons, Your Highness,” Emmeline said as she gave a curtsy. Evidently, Reggie was the one who had called for her.

“Sorry to call you all the way out here. Have a seat.”

“If I may.”

Emmeline sat down in the chair to my left; we were arranged so the two of us were facing Reggie. Colin set the teacups down on the table. When I took a sip, the blend tasted of high-quality tea leaves. Neither tart nor particularly bitter, the flavor allowed me to indulge in the sweet scent of the tea.

“These tea leaves were given to us by Lord Ernest.”

Reggie’s comment reminded me that Ernest was here now, too. In that case, why had Reggie called for his daughter, Emmeline, instead?

“There’s a reason why I called Lady Emmeline here. I want you to bring her along to our next battle, Kiara.”

“What?”

Why did he want me to take Emmeline with me? If she got hurt, Ernest would be devastated. All sorts of worries suddenly welled up inside of me—and that was when it hit me.

“She’s my chaperone, isn’t she?”

He was sending Emmeline with me so that I wouldn’t do anything rash.

Emmeline added, “I initially turned him down. I didn’t believe I had what it took to hold you back. I know I’ll regret it if I don’t have the strength to pull my bow when the moment comes to strike, so I *do* exercise regularly to keep up my strength... but I can’t say I’m qualified to be anyone’s bodyguard.”

No surprise there. Emmeline was the type of person to tell me “you’re not you if you aren’t fighting,” and just as she said, she wasn’t suited to acting as my brakes. Plus, if she was working out in secret, she probably had every intention of charging into the fray herself. However, Reggie didn’t seem to think that was an issue.

“I’m not trying to deprive Kiara of her freedom. I just think she’ll be more careful if there’s another woman around. If she gets a feel for watching out for someone and making sure they’re okay before taking action, perhaps she’ll learn to consult with others before rushing into enemy ranks with just one other companion.”

“You have a point.”

If there was a chance Emmeline might be harmed, there was no doubt I would be more careful. No matter how much of a fire she lit under me, I’d just end up picturing Ernest in tears.

“Don’t worry *too* much. I can hold my own in a melee.” Emmeline’s remark was rather unsettling.

Reggie gave a dry laugh in return. “I *have* heard that you’re quite formidable in battle. In any case, I’d like to have Lady Emmeline accompany you at least once, Kiara. Consider this your punishment for going rogue.”

When he put it like that, I had no choice but to say yes. Noting my obvious reluctance, Reggie heaved a sigh. “I know how stubborn you are, but at least let me worry for you.”

“But I haven’t acted *alone*. Cain is always with me.”

“I know you have Wentworth, but I want to do something for you, too. Is that so terrible? Is my concern a mere nuisance to you?”

“I’ve never thought of you as a nuisance! I just want to do what I can to protect everyone.”

“Then you should allow me the same. I’m only saying this because you’re important to me.”

It didn’t seem like there was anything I could do to change Reggie’s mind; this conversation was starting to feel like pounding on a thick iron wall.

That was when Emmeline muttered something that made my eyes go wide. “My, what a strange mood in the air. It’s enough to give me cavities.”

I looked back, and Emmeline was quietly sipping her tea without a change in expression.



“Huh? What do you mean?!” I panicked.

Reggie, on the other hand, was unfazed. “Love comes in many different forms, Lady Emmeline. Even familial love can be cloying at times. Doesn’t your own father have similar tendencies?”

“You needn’t lower yourself to my father’s level. Are you losing your touch, Your Highness?”

Emmeline’s commentary had thrown me for a loop.

*How did Emmeline turn out so brutal when she was raised by such a sappy father?!*

“Whoa, hang on, Miss Emmeline! I’ll have you know that Lord Ernest was really worried about you!”

“But with us, it’s more common for me to be the one concerned for him.”

“Wow.”

From the sound of it, their family hierarchy had been reversed a long time ago. I finally ran out of arguments, and for some reason, Reggie took that opportunity to pat my head.

“You’re a bright young lady, so I’m sure you can deduce the source of those ‘cavities’ yourself.”

“Yes, it’s as you say. My apologies, Your Highness.”

Emmeline gave a repentant curtsy, and Reggie smiled back at her, satisfied. My eyes darted back and forth between them. What the heck were they talking about? Still, I had a feeling that if I asked for an explanation, they would both turn me down.

“I also want Lady Emmeline on the front lines to send a message to Lord Delphion that the hostages have been freed. Otherwise, I would’ve let Gina be your bodyguard. Then again, her frostfoxes are more effective with their feet on the ground. And taking the possibility of defective spellcasters into account, it would be wise to distribute her elsewhere.”

“Hmph. I don’t want those frostfoxes hanging around all the time. Why don’t you let *this* girl take care of it, little disciple?” Master Horace had been listening

quietly up until now, but he threw in his support for Reggie's proposal in hopes of keeping Reynard and pals at bay.

An expression of uncharacteristic surprise crossed Emmeline's face, her eyes widening. "Miss Kiara... did that strange doll of yours just talk?"

"He sure did! The soul of my spellcasting mentor lives inside this doll."

"A person's soul? Really?"

"That's right."

Even the fearless Emmeline was rendered speechless by this mysterious phenomenon. She didn't say anything else, just stiffening with a carefully blank expression.

*That's fair. Isaac thought he was weird, too. I don't remember seeing Reggie scream after seeing Master Horace, though.*

"Come to think of it, Reggie... Master Horace never took you by surprise, did he?"

"No, no, he certainly did. I had my first encounter with him while you were asleep, so it was easy to look unaffected afterward. Or perhaps I should say... the laughter won out?" Reggie chuckled as he thought back on it. "You really are an eccentric girl."

At least where Master Horace was concerned, I couldn't argue with that.



Once Kiara and Emmeline had left, Felix took their place inside Prince Reginald's room.

"She didn't look terribly happy about it, but did she accept your judgment without issue?"

"Kiara would never give me trouble. She's a good girl," the prince replied with a smile.

*My deepest sympathies,* Felix thought to himself.

"As for the other woman, she's stopped by here twice today. She asked the soldier standing guard at the door where you went, but she wouldn't say what

business she had with you.”

The woman in question was the one who had begun trailing Prince Reginald the other day—one of the hostages who had been trapped in Fort Inion, Ada. Simply put, she seemed to be yet another girl hanging off of the kind and gentle prince. There had been no shortage of similar women in the past, so Felix was used to dealing with them.

There was just one problem.

“Keep an eye on Lady Ada for a little while longer.”

“Of course.” Felix nodded.

“It bothers me that she’s the only hostage from Trisphede. She was on the verge of getting killed when Kiara rushed in, so it’s probably nothing... but let’s not take any chances. Besides,” Reginald went on, “I remember seeing her around the royal palace. If I’m not mistaken, she was dressed as a servant. Well, perhaps it’s not unheard of for a member of a branch family to be tasked with housework.”

“I’m afraid I don’t remember her face clearly enough to say if it was the same girl. Ever since His Majesty declared a change in his policy, too many women have flocked to your side.” Felix couldn’t hold back a dry laugh.

As the orphan of the late crown prince, Prince Reginald had always been liable to be removed from the picture by the new king, and so everyone had kept their distance from him. However, ever since His Majesty had declared him his rightful heir, he had found himself surrounded by women aiming to become the next queen. Felix and the other knights of the royal guard could do little but shrug in the face of this opportunistic change in tune.

Still, if he wanted to lay the foundation for his future, Prince Reginald couldn’t cut out the nobility altogether. Thus, the prince had done his best to address everyone who came his way, but given their sheer number, he had a hard time matching names to faces. He’d been wary of anyone he knew had ties to the queen, but some could have slipped through the cracks.

Speaking of which, Felix recalled hearing that Lord Credias had taken a new wife in place of Kiara, but he’d yet to ever lay eyes on her. The viscount never

went to visit anyone but the nobles he had good relations with. The king's permission was required for any nobleman's marriage, but those documents never made their way to Reginald. On top of that, the bride's family must have felt guilty about marrying her off to the viscount, seeing as there had been no official announcement.

"Even dismissing those concerns, it's not safe for her to loiter about a fort full of men."

"Quite right."

No matter how strictly they were kept in line, there were bound to be a few men among a crowd of thousands who would succumb to their base desires.

"In that case, I'll go bring her back to her room. It's nearly dark outside, but from the looks of it, she's still wandering about."

Felix left Prince Reginald's room, heading up to the fort wall from the main tower. He'd spotted her from afar not too long ago, but now that he was up there, he didn't see her anywhere. When he asked one of the soldiers on patrol, he replied that she'd set out for the fort kitchen.

When Felix got there, Ada was *still* nowhere to be found. According to a soldier renowned for his cooking—in exchange for release from his other tasks, he'd been put on permanent meal duty—Ada had come in demanding to serve tea to the prince. All the soldiers present had turned her away.

"If there were any sort of mishap, it would reflect poorly on us. We don't want to be cast under any suspicion," explained the soldier-chef. Felix was relieved to hear how dutiful these soldiers were. Ada, meanwhile, had been outraged at their refusal and stormed out into the courtyard.

At this point, Felix was getting sick of chasing her down. When he left the inner fort, determined to check the courtyard nonetheless, he finally found Ada quarreling with a group of five soldiers. With all the time she had spent prowling around the fort, the men there had begun to remember her face, and the tacit rule of *Any woman you see could be the spellcaster and her cursed doll, so don't lay a hand on her* had been rendered inapplicable.

He could hear bits and pieces of their conversation from afar. "If you've got so

much time on your hands, why not come play with us?" one man said, to which Ada only fanned the flames with, "You wish!"

"Hey, what are the lot of you doing?!" Felix called out. The entire group of soldiers scrambled away in an instant.

Now the only one left behind, Ada rubbed at her left wrist; perhaps it had been hurt when one of the soldiers made a grab for it. Felix hoped that pain would serve as a lesson learned on how dangerous it was to wander the grounds.

"I warned you to stay inside as much as possible. Why did you disregard me and come all the way out there?" Felix scolded her.

Ada looked off to the side, the spitting image of a pouting child. "What business is it of yours?"

"It has everything to do with me. Securing you hostages was the entire purpose behind our assault on this fort. I need you to stay safe. It would be terrible if one of our soldiers laid a hand on you, and frankly, it only makes trouble for me if you carelessly wander about and encourage their impropriety."

*"She gets to do whatever she wants."*

"Who?"

"Your spellcaster."

Felix heaved a sigh. He had hoped she would've inferred the reason for it.

"The soldiers know their very lives depend on her magic, so they would never so much as touch her. It's naive to act like you two are the same."

Ada didn't appear any less discontent.

"We have no reason to give you special treatment. Nobody else seems to have a problem staying in line. In fact, if you continue to act out like this, we'll have no choice but to suspect you of being an enemy spy."

This was the right time to point out that she was under suspicion, Felix figured. Apparently, that was enough to make even Ada think twice.



“Very well. I’ll go back.”

Ada nodded but pressed her lips into a thin line. She then fixed Felix with the most spiteful glare she could muster.

“Drained” was the word for what Felix was feeling. He’d been warning her to avoid suspicion out of the kindness of his heart, after all. She didn’t have to thank him, but the resentment was uncalled for.

Looking no less bitter, Ada dashed across the courtyard and back to the prison tower, with Felix watching her go.

## Interlude: Her First Impression

*She laughs like an imbecile.* That was Ada's first impression of Kiara.

Ada hadn't known anything about Évrard's spellcaster beyond the fact that she was a woman. Never once had she entertained the thought that the very girl she despised had become a mage.

When they had first met, Ada had been completely taken aback. She had been imprisoned at the time. Hoping to take advantage of the chaotic battle to abscond with Prince Reginald, she'd tried to convince the soldiers, who were aware of her true identity, to let her out. Unfortunately, Emmeline had misinterpreted the situation and stepped in to intervene.

It had been right in the midst of that struggle that the wall had suddenly collapsed, a chestnut-haired girl and a black-haired knight rushing into the room. While Ada was still caught by surprise, the knight had taken out one of the soldiers. The remaining soldier had been instructed to kill everyone there if the hostages were about to escape; thus, he had turned his fallen comrade into a defective spellcaster in hopes of consigning them all to oblivion, losing his own life in the process.

Kiara took out the defective spellcaster in the blink of an eye. The whole spectacle made Ada think back to the Battle of Sestina. Defective spellcasters had been thrown into the fray there, too, but no one had managed to subdue them this handily.

Ada had still been thrown for a loop when Kiara approached her, mistaking her for a victim. At the time, Ada still hadn't realized she was *that* Kiara. She'd just thought, *Oh, so Évrard's spellcaster is another young girl like me.*

More pressingly, the girl's obvious interest in Ada's necklace had sent her into a cold sweat. So long as she had the contract stone, no one would be able to tell she was a spellcaster... or so she'd been told, anyway. Still, she couldn't help getting nervous. If that bullfrog of a viscount had been lying, she knew she would have no choice but to burn this spellcaster to ash and make a run for it.

But thankfully, the girl appeared to assume that the stone was the source of whatever she was feeling.

Only afterward did she finally learn that that spellcaster was Kiara. She was only one year younger, but compared to the mature-looking Ada, she had a bit of a baby face. She wasn't what one would call a breathtaking beauty, and the clay doll hanging from her waist was deformed and vulgar.

Yet the girl looked so full of life. *Why?* Ada wondered.

She had escaped an unwanted marriage, yes, but there was no way a daughter of nobility could make it all on her own. Ada had always taken some small amount of solace in the thought that she was off somewhere leading a miserable existence.

In reality, Kiara was fighting of her own volition, operating freely enough within the army to be given a knight of her own.

Why was *she* so free after running away while the pitiful, captive Ada had to constantly struggle against her own powerlessness? Ada spent that entire day gnashing her teeth in frustration, all the way until the dead of night.

The next day, Ada learned something even *more* vexing: not only did Prince Reginald care for Kiara, but he even allowed her to call him by name. But *Ada* was supposed to be the one receiving his favor! The girl's heart burned with rage.

Still, she had to wonder: why *had* Kiara become a spellcaster? This girl before her was the same one who had said, "Oh, I see! Thanks, I was just wondering," and laughed like a simpleton when Ada told her the pendant was a keepsake. She had to have undergone the same torturous process of becoming a mage.

However, she decided to put that question aside for the time being.

Fortunately for her, no one suspected Ada. To ensure that Prince Reginald would trust her enough to run away with her when the day of reckoning came, she had to get in his good graces while she still had the chance. With that goal in mind, she had wandered the fort hoping to bump into him by chance, but she couldn't catch sight of him anywhere.

The soldiers from Évrard were by and large kind men, and they rarely tried to

start anything—which she was grateful for. Back when she'd been traveling with the Llewynian army, she had killed a few soldiers here and there when attempting to fend them off with her magic; however, if she used her magic here, there was a chance Kiara might catch on to her.

She had wondered why the soldiers of Farzia were such upstanding men, only to learn that they had been warned against doing anything untoward to the women of the fort... because they'd be in trouble if that girl just happened to be the spellcaster. Of course, that was probably just the official pretext; surely it was *really* because the troops were led by such a kind prince.

Ada had taken advantage of that to continue following Prince Reginald's tracks, but by the time the sky had been dyed in the colors of twilight and it had grown dark outside, she was exhausted.

*Let's call it a day.*

The moment she made that call, she casually glanced up and down the fort wall—and spotted Kiara outside the fort. She was engaged in a friendly chat with a man who had the look of a merchant.

*Is she making eyes at yet another man?* Ada wondered, grinding her molars in fury.

Eventually, Prince Reginald came along, seemingly for no other reason than to bring Kiara back inside.

He avoided *her*, but not Kiara. The knowledge only further ruffled Ada's feathers.

## Chapter 2: Battle on the Alesia River

A few days after my reunion with Isaac, we received word that the Llewynian army was on the move.

First, a number of their troops had left their fort ahead of the rest. Thousands of soldiers split off in different directions to chase after Alan's men, who had set out to join up with us after our capture of Fort Inion. Alan had thought their behavior strange for a group that was supposedly on the attack—and that was when the enemy approached him with a white flag. There, he finally identified them as Lord Delphion's men.

What's more, the baron himself came up to kneel before Alan—who, deputy commander though he was, was two or three times younger than the man—requesting to merge with his forces. According to Lord Delphion, as soon as they heard word that Reggie had captured Fort Inion and freed Emmeline and the girls in the process, they had defected from Llewyne.

After consulting with General Jerome, Lord Limerick's younger brother, and Lord Enister, a veteran of countless battles, he made the decision to accept Lord Delphion's men into their ranks.

Such were the contents of the first report. After hearing it, Reggie frowned. Surely the Llewynians had kept the hostages' whereabouts secret out of fear that the Delphion troops might run off to take them back.

"That they knew regardless must mean Llewyne leaked the information to them on purpose."

No doubt Alan was wary of that, too. Reggie thought perhaps he should send over reinforcements, but just as he was preparing to deploy them, the next post-horse arrived.

Evidently, the forces of Llewyne and Salekhard were in hot pursuit of Alan's troops. At that point, Alan was about a full day's walk away from Fort Inion. He had the option of escaping to the fort, but considering how fast the enemy was

closing in, he instead chose to confront them on the spot.

When I heard they had opened hostilities along the Alesia River, I was taken aback. It was somewhere Alan had fought the Llewynians in the RPG.

In that section of the story, not long after making an ally of Lord Delphion's brother Ernest, Alan launched an assault on the Llewynian army. After talking with Ernest in the heat of the battle, Lord Delphion was persuaded to turn against Llewyrne. In the end, the baron died, taking a great deal of Llewynians down with him.

Now, though, we had recovered the hostages; thus, I'd been convinced that Llewyrne would turn their attention to Fort Inion instead. Reggie, too, had assumed the baron would wait until they'd marched all the way here to turn on the Llewynians.

"It would be much safer to betray them with allies in the immediate vicinity."

Yet Lord Delphion had chosen to defect almost immediately.

"Someone must have put him up to it," came Reggie's ominous murmur.

But if that was really the case, what was in it for the Llewynians?

"Clashing with them along the Alesia River would be much harder than fighting them from inside our fort. What's more, I'll bet our troops have fallen completely out of sync after bringing the Delphions into our ranks," was Reggie's assessment after listening to the report. Adding those 3,000 men of the baron's to his forces would just put Alan at a greater disadvantage, he claimed.

I didn't quite understand the logic there, so Cain explained it to me in a hushed whisper. "It's because we've fought against the baron's soldiers once before. Our men will be plagued with suspicions that they're only pretending to be our allies as part of Llewyrne's plan."

Now I got it. A deep wedge had been driven between the two forces after fighting each other for their lives; it was only natural that they wouldn't let down their guard around each other. Perhaps Llewyrne was aiming to sow discord among the Farzian ranks with this move.



While Cain was explaining the situation to me, Reggie consulted with Lord Azure and Lord Ernest and decided on a general outline of what to do next.

“I’ll leave the fort in Lord Azure’s hands. Where the Delphion forces are concerned, I think bringing Lord Ernest’s men along would be the best remedy for the issue.”

“But no matter how fast we hurry, that’s at least a day’s journey. We can only hope the situation doesn’t worsen in that time,” remarked Ernest, his expression grim.

“I’m sure Alan and his men can handle it. I simply hope it doesn’t escalate into a battle of attrition,” Reggie replied. There was no smile to be found on his face, either.

I came forward with a proposal. “I’ll set out before everyone else. If I’m riding solo, it shouldn’t take a full day to get there; I can arrive ahead of schedule.”

That would take some of the burden off of Alan. The enemy had probably relaxed their guard under the assumption that the spellcaster wasn’t around, which gave me the perfect opportunity to strike.

It only took Reggie a few seconds to consider my suggestion. Then, rather than me, he flicked his gaze toward Cain. Noticing that, the knight responded with a small bow, as if asking for permission.

I felt a knot in the pit of my stomach when Reggie refused to look at me. It was almost as if Reggie had handed his rights as my caretaker over to Cain instead. I knew it was strange of me to be so upset about that; it was only natural for an older man like Cain to be treated as a guardian of mine.

And yet... why did it feel so much like Reggie was abandoning me?

We received permission almost immediately. I left the main tower, which we had gathered in to hear the report, my gait sluggish as I trudged back to my room. Fortunately, I had packed for so many trips by now that no matter how out of it I was, my hands practically moved on their own.

I put on my cloak, laced up my shoes, and stuffed all the bare essentials into a single bag. This was an emergency situation, so I would be leaving everything else behind. If we ended up abandoning the fort, Reggie’s lord-in-waiting, Colin,

would grab my things—and if there wasn't even time for that, someone would just dispose of them.

My anxiety had died down while I was busy getting my things together, but once I'd finished the tasks at hand, it reared its head again. Telling myself that the emotion was just a trick of the mind and that I didn't have time to focus on anything else when I was heading to battle, I left my room. Once I'd exited the main tower, cut across the courtyard, and was just about to pass through the gate, I looked back over my shoulder, forlorn.

I knew there was no way he could see my face; still, I looked up at the main tower with just a little spark of hope. Disappointed when I saw no one in the window, I lowered my gaze.

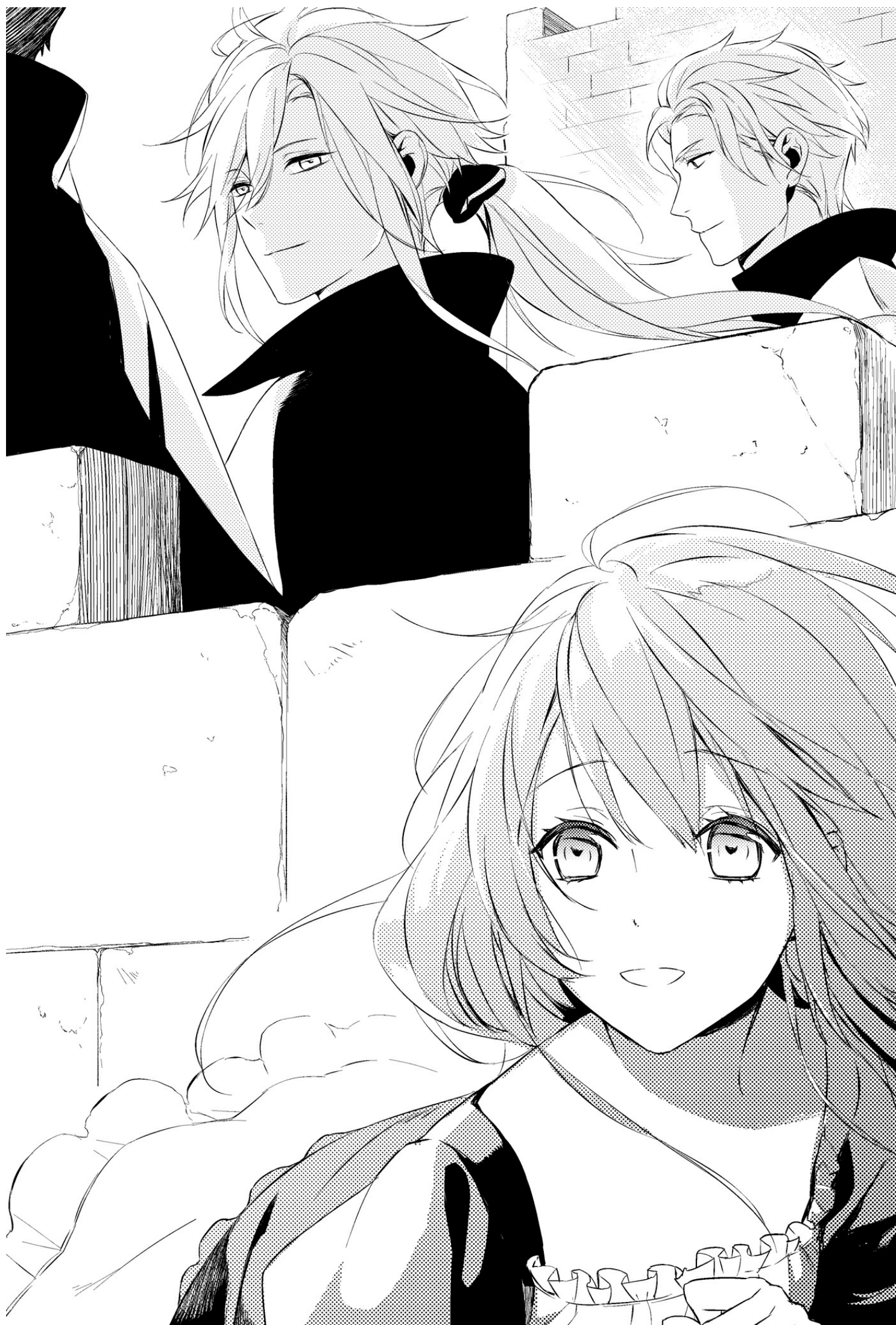
That was when I spotted Reggie leaving the main tower, heading somewhere else with his knights.

"Reggie," I called out in a soft voice.

As surprised as I was to hear the voice inside of me slip out, I assumed Reggie would never pick up on such a faint whisper, given how far away he was.

However, he stopped in his tracks and turned his head.

When his eyes met with mine, his lips parted slightly in a rare show of dismay, and then he flashed me a small smile. Just that was enough to make all the noise in my heart, like static on a TV screen, calm down until it had fizzled out completely. His watchful gaze brought me back to my senses.



*Don't worry. I know I can do it.* I gave him a small wave and finally walked off.

"You're still such a kid," Master Horace muttered not a few steps later.

"Did you say something?"

"Aw, don't worry about it. Eeeheehee! Must be tough being at your mercy... but he's just accepted that as part of the deal, I guess. Some things are better left unspoken."

Everything after his weird cackle had been mumbled, so I couldn't quite hear what he'd said. But Master Horace laughing at his own soliloquies was nothing new, so I decided not to pay it too much mind.



Once I'd left the inner fort, I met up with Cain and Emmeline. As a precaution, we set out with twenty cavalrymen led by Reggie's knight Cyrus.

Nothing particularly dangerous happened along the way. I rode my own horse for the first time in a while. If we were going to cover that much distance in one stretch, it didn't seem like a good idea for me to ride double with Cain; after all, we'd be putting too much strain on our poor steed.

Besides, I was feeling a little extra stubborn today. Seeing Reggie look to Cain for permission had stuck like a thorn in my heart. It'd made me feel like he didn't trust *my* judgment.

Unfortunately, it had been ages since I'd last ridden a horse by myself, so I was exhausted by the time we finally stopped to rest. I pushed on nonetheless, but after our second break, I was too tired to fool Cain's eyes any longer.

"I knew we should have ridden together. Why don't we use your horse most of the way, then switch to mine right before we reach the battlefield? That way, we won't tire them out."

I almost considered taking Cain up on his offer. However, if we wanted to keep a fast pace, we were better off sticking with our current plan.

When I said as much, Cain scooped up my bangs in his fingers, lightly stroking my forehead. "Don't push yourself too hard."

I was so flustered by the gentle touch, I nearly squirmed under his hand.

“You’re putting the cart before the horse. If you’re too tired, you won’t have the energy to do what you have to when the time comes.”

I knew Cain was right, but I just couldn’t bring myself to agree. That was when he grabbed me by the wrist and took off walking.

“Hey, what are you doing?!”

“I don’t know why you’re being so stubborn about this, but I’m not waiting for your answer any longer. It won’t be an issue if we start riding together from this point onward, and besides, it’s not as if you’ll be staying on your horse once we get there.”

Once he had dragged us all the way over to his horse, he grabbed me by the waist and threw me over his shoulder. He then mounted the horse, wasting no time in sitting me down in front of him. Only after I was settled down in the saddle did I notice Cyrus and the rest of the knights casting unimpressed looks our way.

“Let’s head out. Have someone look after her horse,” Cain requested of Cyrus. My horse was consequently entrusted to one of the other knights.

Once we’d set out, it became quickly apparent how much easier this was on me. By the time we made it to our next break, I was regretting how pigheaded I’d been—and that was when Emmeline came to rub salt in the wound.

“You’re amazing, Miss Kiara. You always exceed my expectations, even when it comes to *these* matters,” she said deliberately, standing next to me as I sat with my back against a tree. “For the betterment of Delphion, I’m hoping to marry a strong military man. From that angle, His Highness’ knights seem like very capable prospects. It would work to my advantage whenever I seek the prince’s ear, too. Any chance you could teach me the trick to seducing one of them?”

“WHAT? Seduce?!”

*Goodness gracious, Miss Emmeline!* From the sound of it, she’d set her sights on the royal guard as potential husband material. This sort of calculating move sure seemed in line with her character.

Reggie's knights were all more than competent enough to be welcomed into a high-class noble family. Plus, they had a plethora of actual combat experience, so if they were to join a military campaign at any point in the future, they would have plenty of useful knowledge to share.

*But why are you asking me? I swear I've never seduced anybody in my life!*

"I'd love to hear about how you got so close to Sir Cain. I'll draw my own conclusions from the facts, so leave the heavy lifting to me."

*What heavy lifting?! You're crazy optimistic, Emmeline!*

Like a deer in headlights, I stood frozen to the spot—until Cain came and hauled me away to his horse.

Then, the battlefield came into view at last.



The Farzian and Llewynian forces were clashing swords. Considering it had been several hours since we'd heard the initial news, there was a good chance they had fought once, drawn back, and then taken up arms yet again.

Observing the scene from slightly higher ground, it became clear that Alan and his forces had engaged with the enemy here in order to use the river as a makeshift bulwark. The rugged stones stopped the Llewynians in their tracks, preventing them from blindly charging in. Our forces were taking advantage of that as best as they could, intercepting the enemy as they carefully navigated around the rocks.

They stood firm in their strategy of not pushing too far past the riverbank while still standing their ground on advantageous terrain—most likely by the recommendation of our cautious Jerome rather than the gung-ho Alan.

Amid it all, a giant goat pranced gloriously across the battlefield.

Lord Enister was dashing across the riverbed, first upstream and then downstream, knocking down enemy soldiers with his cane. Once the Llewynians had collapsed from the impact, Farzian soldiers would gather around to deal them the finishing blow.

As the corpses piled up, the river's shores were dyed in black and crimson,

and its water was tinged a pale red. The Llewynians gradually fanned out, launching attacks along both the upper and lower reaches of the river. Alan and his men met them head-on to fend them off, but keeping them at bay was the best they could manage.

“There’s not much momentum on the Farzian side,” Cain muttered as he steered our horse closer.

I got the same feeling; they just didn’t have the drive they needed to push the Llewynians back. Among the central troops, Lord Enister appeared to be single-handedly dominating the fight, but a squad of soldiers who looked considerably less striking after tying up their capes—probably the defected troops of Lord Delphion’s—was lumbering around the battlefield.

“Can you take us closer to the front, Sir Cain?”

With a nod, he gave his horse a light kick in the flank.

“Hold it right there!” Cyrus and company came chasing us down. Without my golem, I had all the attack and defense stats of a marshmallow, so they were probably worried it was too dangerous to let me go.

“I’m going to force the Llewynians back!” I shouted, turning to look back at them. Even Emmeline was staring at me like I was insane. No matter what they thought, though, I was convinced that now was the time to act. If the spellcaster everyone had assumed was elsewhere made a sudden appearance, the Llewynians might be shocked enough to fall back.

The units to the rear whipped around with startled expressions as a much smaller group of cavalry came galloping up behind them.

“Out of the way, please! I’m heading to the front lines!”

There were only two reasons they didn’t automatically assume we were an enemy: one, because of the dress I was wearing, which looked completely out-of-place on the battlefield, and two, because Cyrus and his knights had raised the flag of Farzia in a hurry. Surprised as they were, the Farzian soldiers opened a path for us.

“Wait, what?! Is that you, Kiara?!”



“We got here first!” I bluntly informed Alan as I passed him by. It was an incredibly succinct explanation, but I hoped it would be enough to get the message across.

Right before we reached the front lines, Cain let me down from his horse. The epicenter of the battle was just a few dozen mers ahead. While Cain stood watch for any incoming enemy soldiers, I touched a nearby boulder with a handful of copper ore, calling up an image in my mind.

If I *really* wanted to give them a scare, I had to bring them face-to-face with the strongest creature I could imagine.

“I’ll bet it’s easier to move around without wings in the way. Let’s do this Japanese style!”

The copper ore melted into the boulder, and in the next moment, the rock started to bulge and swell. I extended the reach of my mana to the surrounding rocks, too. Bending to my will, several of the stones along the shore were lifted into the air, twisting and winding together to form the shape of a single creature.

Its body was about fifty mers long. At the very front of it, held aloft toward the sky, was a crocodilian maw filled with sharp teeth. Its face was adorned with a long beard and two horns. Since I’d figured it would be a waste of energy, I hadn’t bothered etching scales into the stones of its body, but this was close enough to what I’d envisioned.

Enemies and allies alike shrieked and shouted, their voices all uttering the same word.

“It’s a monster!”

What I’d made was just a Japanese-style dragon—long, snakelike body and all—but the people of this world had never seen anything like it before. They were just as awed and frightened as I’d hoped. In contrast to the faltering Llewynians, the Farzian soldiers rallied at the news of the spellcaster’s arrival.

I had my dragon charge in headfirst toward the opposite shore of the river. After stretching itself out and towering overhead, it slithered down alongside the river, knocking Llewynian soldiers out of its path with its stone body. Each

time, a sickening, dull thud rang out, accompanied by a bloodcurdling scream. I gritted my teeth, ignoring the sounds as best I could.

After clearing out an entire section of the riverbed, I had it slide to the center of the battlefield. Faced with my stone dragon, the Llewynians there either ran for their lives or threw themselves at it in desperation. Unfortunately, they had yet to show any signs of retreat.

I had my dragon curl in on itself like a hedgehog, ready to give the men an even bigger scare—but that was when it hit me.

“Huh? What’s... going on?”

All of a sudden, I was assailed with a feverish sensation, chills running down my spine. It felt much like falling ill, but I had no idea why I would be running a temperature *now*.

“M-Master Horace? I feel... weird...”

As soon as he noticed that I had lost control of my magic, Cain held out a hand for me. Desperate for whatever support I could get, I grabbed hold of his wrist before I realized what I was doing.

“Let’s pull back for now, Miss Kiara.”

“No... wait. I need to do... something... first.”

Through clenched teeth, I called back my gradually crumbling dragon, laying it flat along the opposite shore.

“Ugh...”

Fighting down a wave of nausea, I forced my mana forward. It caused me so much pain that I found myself squeezing Cain’s wrist a little too tightly.

In return for my efforts, my dragon instantly transformed into a myriad of stone pillars. Although they were no taller than me, they were sure to provide a sturdier bulwark than the stones of the riverbed.

The only issue was that it was still perfectly possible to get by on foot. Spurred on from behind, the Llewynians weaved through the stone pillars, fording the river made narrow by piles of corpses. A unit of Alan’s and Lord Enister’s men rushed over in an attempt to push them back, but unfortunately, the other

soldiers in the area were sluggish in their response. They were clearly intimidated.

*This is bad! At this rate, Alan's going to get hurt! Why can't I summon any strength?!*

"Miss Kiara! Miss Kiara, what happened?!" Cain called out, his face twisted in a grimace. I was in too much agony to muster a reply. All I wanted was to crouch down on the spot.

As I did my best to hold myself together, I caught a glimpse of Emmeline nocking an arrow. She was aiming in the direction of a black-haired man near the prime of his life, his slightly plump figure clad in a military uniform. He was surrounded by three Llewynian soldiers.

Emmeline let her arrow fly at one of these soldiers. Struck clean through his face and neck, he crumpled to the ground. Her confidence was entirely justified, from the look of it; she was quite skilled with a bow.

The man at the center of the mob glanced back at Emmeline, stunned.

"Emmeline?!"

"You mustn't let anyone see such a disgraceful display, Uncle Henry. If you carelessly leave a hole in our battle lines, my life alone won't be enough to atone for it. My dear aunt will have to offer up her own alongside me."

Emmeline had referred to him as an uncle, so this "Henry" fellow had to be Lord Delphion.

He howled, "Nooo! Don't say that, Emmeline! Take me! Take me insteaad!"

Still wailing, he charged at the Llewynians in a pure show of desperation. Determined to keep their baron alive, if no one else, the surrounding Delphion soldiers—from commanding officers to grunts—threw themselves at the enemy like men possessed.

Alan's and Jerome's forces were completely flabbergasted at the sight of it. Had it truly only taken three seconds to kick their troops into gear?

"Keep it up!" came Alan's command, and his men joined the assault on the Llewynians.

While the Llewynian soldiers looked on in horror at Lord Delphion, who was darting across the battlefield with a bizarre battle cry of “Eeeeeek!” they were thrown into disarray by Lord Enister’s men and cut down by Alan’s.

Once the baron’s men started to lose steam, Alan stepped forward to make up for the loss. Determining that it would be hard to secure a victory at this rate, the Llewynians finally began to fall back.

Just then, I was once again struck with an overwhelming sense of fatigue, and I fell to my knees on the spot.

“Hey, knightly boy! Get us out of here! *You-know-who* is here!” Master Horace instructed, panic seeping into his voice. Cain complied, lifting me up onto his horse.

“Master Horace... Who are you... talking about?”

*Who on earth could reduce me to this state just by being nearby?*

“If you head all the way to the back of the formation, the effects will start to wane. Hurry up and take her!” Master Horace kept barking orders at Cain, completely disregarding my question.



I hid myself in the shade of a tree, where we could still see the soldiers at the rear. Had Cain taken me back to the tent to more carefully attend to me, everyone might have made the assumption that the spellcaster had been grievously injured, leaving our troops shaken for it. On the other hand, we couldn’t let anyone catch sight of me in bad shape either, so I had him set me down somewhere out of the way. To further cover our bases, Cain and Cyrus arranged for a few knights to surround the area and keep anyone from getting too close.

In the event that the other soldiers started to get worried, I asked the knights to say something like, “The spellcaster is meditating in preparation for her next spell.”

More important than any of that, however, was what had put me out of commission in the first place.

“Lord Credias... is among the Llewynian forces?”

“That’s my best guess. That pressure was definitely that of a mentor manipulating their disciple’s mana. The sensation’s a little different when I’m in this doll, but there’s no mistaking it.”

Seeing as Master Horace had died right after I had become a spellcaster, never before had I experienced the true binding force of a mentor-disciple tie.

*So that’s what it feels like.*

“It’s the only possible explanation for how you ended up like that.”

Perhaps because we had withdrawn from the front lines and thus distanced ourselves from the source, the mysterious lethargy had disappeared as swiftly as if I’d imagined it in the first place. The reason Cain had reacted so strongly, however, was because the tips of both of my little fingers were stained with blood. It had taken me a while to notice with how sick I was feeling, but they really stung. When I’d taken a closer look, I’d found that the very tips of my fingers had been shaved away, just like the time I’d saved Reggie.

According to Master Horace, that’d happened because, quote, “you pushed yourself too far, you clod.”

My mana had been completely wrecked by Lord Credias’ influence, yet I’d kept pushing myself to cast my magic. As a result, part of my body had turned to sand. I could only be grateful that it had stopped at my fingertips.

“Ouch...”

It was going to take a little while before the painkiller I’d just taken set in. I was pretty sure the bleeding should’ve just about stopped by now, but I was too scared to check. Even if too little had been taken off to be particularly noticeable, I didn’t want to look down at my own whittled fingers.

Emmeline was the one who had tended to my wounds, but she’d turned just about as pale as you could expect.

“I’m really sorry about this, Miss Emmeline. I know it’s not a pretty sight,” I had told her.

Emmeline had just shaken her head with a look of composure. “That’s not

something the victim ought to be saying. This is a unique injury, certainly, but I understand now that it's one of the idiosyncrasies of being a spellcaster. Why, they look so smooth that if you hadn't told me, I wouldn't even have noticed the tips were scraped away."

*True. You'd never find such a bizarre injury on anyone but a spellcaster.*

Once Emmeline had left to put away the cloth she'd used to wipe up my blood, Master Horace had ordered me to get some rest. I was still running a fever from overusing my magic, so I'd decided to take his advice.

Cain asked, "How's your fever?"

I thoughtfully tilted my head to one side. It was hard to tell. All I could say for sure was that I still felt out of it.

"Pardon me." Cain reached out to touch my forehead. His hand felt cool against my skin, the sensation so comforting that my eyes drifted shut.

This really drove home how much Cain's attitude toward me had changed. When we'd first set out on our campaign, he'd been awfully overprotective. If things were the same as back then, he'd be dragging me back to the fort as we speak. Now, though, he was doing everything in his power to help me fight—just like he'd promised.

"I'll ask Lady Emmeline to bring us something to help with the fever." He took off his cape and draped it over me before he took his leave.

*You don't have to go that far,* I thought for a fleeting moment, but it *was* nice and warm. I imagined I'd be loath to hand it back to him whenever he returned. That aside, though, it seemed my temperature was still higher than I'd thought.

"Will it go back down by tomorrow? I sure hope so."

"Hard to say. Nobody with a brain ever tries going against their mentor's influence. Eeeheehee! Why don't you keep a record of how long it takes to pass, then leave that behind for the next generation?"

"But I've never formed a proper mentor-disciple contract. Would that even serve as a guideline?"

As I wondered about that, I brought a hand to my own forehead. I still

couldn't tell how bad my fever was, but my fingers hurt just from moving them.

*Boy, I really hope my fingers grow back.*

That made me think back to when I'd touched Reggie's injury. When I'd attempted to extract the contract sand in his system, that portion of his skin had swelled, sealing the wound. I wondered if I could pull off something similar here.

Closing my eyes, I tried to feel out the mana within my hand. I could sense it slowly circulating. But in just one area—which I assumed to be the tip of my finger—the flow had been stifled, like it was bumping up against a jagged pathway. I gathered more mana there bit by bit. Then, I willed it to harden.

I could feel the veins of my mana gradually mending themselves, but it hurt so much that I had to call it quits partway through. The pain, very similar to what I'd feel from a burn, had been nearly enough to bring tears to my eyes.

"Oww..."

All I could do was hope that the painkiller would kick in soon. It was no use trying anything like this.

Having sensed the stirring of my mana, Master Horace nudged at my arm. "Did you try something?"

"Yeah. I tried my hand at closing up the wounds."

He followed up with a surprising response. "If my theory is correct, that should be well within the realm of possibility. Eeeheehee!"

"What, really?"

"We spellcasters turn into sand in our last moments, no matter what element we are—that's one thing we can say for sure. And sand falls under your specialty, doesn't it?"

"Oh, you have a point there."

"Then how's that apply to the body *before* it turns to sand?"

"That's a good question. And is that really sand, you think?"

I knew that bones would crumble when burned, but that was a result of



calcification, right?

*Aah, but limestone and rocks have calcium mixed into them, I think. Then does it make sense to include that under the same category as dirt and rocks?*

When I gave a thoughtful hum, Master Horace advised me to take a discreet look at my wounds, since the bleeding had probably stopped by now.

“Why do I have to be discreet about it?”

“Spellcasters aren’t supposed to broadcast the fruits of their research. Having an ace up your sleeve lets you catch the enemy off guard when you’re in a tight spot. You’re better off keeping your discoveries a secret—even from your allies.”

His hushed guidance basically boiled down to “keep your trade secrets.” That made sense to me, so I followed his advice. Pulling Cain’s cape over my head, I turned to face the tree I’d been leaning against.

I gently removed the bandage and gauze wrapped around my left pinkie. It looked like the bleeding had stopped. The tip of my finger looked a little bit flat, but otherwise, it was more or less back to normal.

Of course, since I’d just been injured, it looked like the flesh there had swelled a bit. Maybe it would start to look a little more natural with time.

“It worked... I guess?”

“If you’re confident enough to call it a success, you must’ve done a pretty good job,” Master Horace remarked.

I nodded. Yeah, I was pretty sure this *did* count as a success. Grinning with delight over my triumph, I put the bandage back on.

After sitting back against the tree once more, I was overtaken by a new concern. I could fix up smaller injuries this way, sure, but the pain of mending it had been too much to bear. Besides, the process had really taken a toll on me. Reggie’s injury had been a larger one, but that had only worked out because I had been so desperate to make it work; plus, I’d used my own blood to do it. Even then, I’d passed out afterward.

Whether I was casting it on myself or someone else, it was a pretty tough

spell to use.

*Wait a second. Did Reggie pass out partway through because he felt the same pain?*

Humming thoughtfully, I filed it away as something that needed practice.

In the meantime, my fever still wasn't going down. It was all because Lord Credias was on the battlefield. If this is what she'd had to deal with, no wonder Game-Kiara had never turned against him.

*Still, how come Lord Credias never showed up in the game?*

I'd thought about it countless times before and never come up with an answer. There were three possibilities I had considered:

One: Lord Credias had already died before he could confront Alan's party, and Kiara had kept on fighting for a different reason.

Two: he was somewhere in the vicinity, but he died for some unrelated reason before he could make an appearance—a bit of an anticlimax.

Three: he was somewhere in the vicinity, but he knew he didn't have a good chance of winning. When he saw Kiara die, he ran off.

I gave some thought to all three options. If the first was true, the only possible explanation was Kiara's devotion to the queen. Lately, I'd become convinced that this was the most likely of the three possibilities. Options two and three still left the question of why the viscount had never fought for himself.

"Why doesn't the viscount ever seem to use any magic?" I mumbled aloud.

"Hmm..." Master Horace sank into thought for a time. "If he can manage to create defectives, he *should* be good enough to show up on the front lines."

If even Master Horace didn't have an answer to that one, I was pretty stuck.

The immediate problem was that he was going to realize sooner or later what kind of impact he had on me. If my attacks died out whenever he willed it, he would make the connection instantly. If that happened, the Llewynians would be sure to bring Lord Credias to all future battles, and I would be rendered completely useless as a warrior.

Thus, I had to take Lord Credias down at all costs.

I didn't subscribe to the idea that people's destinies were set in stone from the moment they were born. Otherwise, changing just one decision wouldn't be enough to change anyone's fate. But perhaps it was possible that there were a few set obstacles to overcome in everyone's lives.

For me, one of those might have been the viscount of Credias.

"No matter *what* kind of fate I have with him, I really wish it could've been a different guy."

Lamenting my dashed hopes of never having anything to do with the man again, I heaved a sigh.



The battle ultimately entered into a ceasefire. As evening fell, we and the Llewynians huddled around our respective bonfires, keeping a watchful eye on the opposing side. According to Alan, this was, in fact, the second time that the hostilities had ended in a standoff from across the river.

"There was no time for bellyaching the first time around, so we had no issues uniting under the common goal of beating back the Llewynians. It was during the ceasefire that my men started a blame game with Delphion. You saw for yourselves where *that* got us in the next skirmish."

Our men had grown suspicious that the Delphion soldiers were only pretending to fall in line to lead us into a trap. Now that their motives had been called into question, the Delphion men had wilted, suddenly much more self-conscious. Lord Delphion had done his best to get the situation under control, but to no avail. Alan and Lord Enister had considered moving back their battle lines to compensate, but they couldn't find a more desirable battleground than the river.

Just as they had been stuck for a solution, Emmeline and I had shown up, dispelling all the tension in our wake. Upon witnessing Delphion's furious rush at the Llewynians, our soldiers had finally rid themselves of their doubts, shifting their focus toward defeating the enemy standing before them.

"How are you holding up?" Alan asked me.

I pumped a fist in the air. “All better! I’m good to fight in the next battle.”

Cain considered that for a moment, then gave me a nod. “If you say so.”

Alan shot Cain a look that said, *You sure about that?* before turning back to me. “I heard you fell to pieces due to a spellcaster in the enemy ranks. How are you planning to deal with that?”

“All I have to do is keep my distance, so I’m going to try out some long-range attacks this time.”

“Going to pop off your golem’s arm again?” he asked, thinking back to the rocket punch he’d witnessed during the battle on the border.

“Something like that.”

“I suppose that’ll do. If it turns into a free-for-all, hold your fire. Having your golem simply stand guard in the rear will be more than enough to keep the Llewynians scared.”

“Got it.”

The last thing I wanted was to accidentally crush one of my own comrades. The moment the situation escalated beyond my control, I would back off.

Alan always had his hands full with something, so as soon as he’d confirmed whether I would be participating in the fight or not, he took off to go find the other generals.

Instead, it was Emmeline who gave me an incredulous look, one eyebrow raised. “Are you *sure* you’re feeling alright?”

“Yep! My fever’s gone down, so I’m good to go!”

After I bounced around to show her I was fit as a fiddle, Emmeline placed a hand to my forehead. That confirmed that my temperature was normal, so she was forced to acknowledge that I was hale and hearty, despite the skeptical look on her face.

“Does she seem okay to you, Sir Cain?”

“If Miss Kiara says she’s fine, then she’s fine,” he answered.

Emmeline frowned, looking more and more bemused. “So long as she said she

could handle it, I imagine you wouldn't stop her from putting one foot into the very chasm of death."

"Spellcasters go beyond our understanding. We have no choice but to defer to Miss Kiara's and Sir Horace's judgment here."

As far as I was concerned, he was just stating the obvious, but Emmeline was struggling to come to grips with it. She had other things to take care of, however, so she gave up on pressing the issue any further.

"Then if you'll excuse me, I have to go wrangle my uncle," she declared before striding off to where the Delphion forces were gathered.

As we watched Emmeline go, Cain said, "Whatever the case, now isn't the time for you to be risking your life. Once you've reached the limits of where your obstinacy can take you, I'm dragging you back."

"That's all I need. Thank you, Sir Cain."

Cain was the one who had given me the opportunity to fight. Alan wouldn't have trusted me if he only had my word for it; it was because Cain had backed me up that he'd believed I was good to go.

"When do you think the next fight will start?"

Llewyne had fallen back for the time being, afraid of what the spellcaster might do. The considerable damage they had taken was probably a factor, too. As nice as it would have been for them to throw in the towel there, the fact that we were engaged in a standoff was a sign that Llewyne planned to mount yet another attack.

"Sometime before His Highness' troops arrive tomorrow, I'd wager. Now that you've rushed over from the fort, the enemy likely realizes that they have to end this as quickly as possible, or else even more reinforcements are bound to show up. I'd say they make their move in the morning."

It turned out Cain's prediction was right on the money.



The Llewynians made their move the next day, before the sun had fully risen above the horizon—but all they did was fire their arrows from the other side of

the river. If we struck back against them, they would just pull away, so Alan went to great lengths to make sure none of his men stuck out ahead of the pack.

I wanted to help out the soldiers who had pushed too far ahead, but it was difficult to carry out pinpoint attacks from a distance. Our own men were bound to get caught up in it. That said, spending all my time watching and waiting wasn't doing us much good.

"If I don't hurry up and attack, they're going to figure out that I've been compromised!"

"For now, they might assume you're hanging back as part of some strategy, but if you haven't done anything by the time the battle's over... then yeah, they'll probably catch on," Master Horace agreed.

"I could cut around from behind, but if the viscount heads that way, I'll be right back where I started. Should I feint from the side, then launch a long-range attack with a projectile? Though, wait... just how much of a disciple's magic *can* a mentor block?"

"Flames, water, and wind will all fizzle out and die before them."

*Wow. So if you form a mentor-disciple contract with someone, there's really no way to attack them.*

"Does that include the byproduct of a spell? For example, the caster may be the one who starts a fire, but they have no control over where the flames spread, right?"

"Certainly someone's tried that trick before, but I couldn't tell you how it went. Spellcasters are scattered all over the place, and they rarely interact with each other."

"In other words, they're a bunch of shut-in researchers?"

"There's a reason for that. Nobody wants to stay tied down by their mentor-disciple contracts."

It was a safety measure, apparently. The result was that it became even harder to pin down any information regarding spellcasters.

“Surely at some point or another, *some* brave spellcaster used every trick in the book to kill their mentor. If only they’d left a record of it somewhere.”

“Your mind goes to some disturbing places every now and then, you know that? You’ll just have to be the first one to pull it off.”

“Any chance the disciple could use the bond to exert control over their mentor?”

“No way. If it were possible, you wouldn’t see so many spellcasters willing to take on disciples. Since I’ve never heard any rumblings about that, it must mean that the moment someone becomes a spellcaster, all control goes right to the mentor.”

Every one of my ideas was a non-starter. Out of options, I did my best to think of a different strategy. I then said to Cain, “I’m going to move off to the side. There’s something I’d like to try.”

Staying put was the worst thing I could do in this scenario. Thus, I opted to take a trial-and-error approach.

First, I had my golem tramp over to a spot not far from the left flank of our forces. From there, I had it shuffle little by little over the ground, trying to get as close as I possibly could without wandering into Lord Credias’ sphere of influence.

Eventually, I reached a spot where I would be strangled for breath if I took even one step closer. I hastily had it move three paces back.

When I briefly crouched down on the spot, Cain patted me on the back. I appreciated the gesture and all, but the motion just made me want to vomit even more. I asked him to stop, then waited for the effects to subside.

Next, I searched in the direction I figured Lord Credias would be. It was the same method I’d used when I was hunting for Master Horace way back when; I didn’t have a contract stone anymore, but I could sense his presence as a fellow spellcaster. Just imagining his face made me sick, so I did my best to banish all worldly thoughts from my mind.

“What’s the verdict?”



“Feeling it out from both here and over there... I think he’s near the center of the enemy lines.”

Rather than assessing his whereabouts from just one direction, measuring it from two different points would give me a more accurate estimate of where he was.

Once that was confirmed, there was only one thing left to do.

“Now I just have to land an attack somewhere far away from Lord Credias. That way he won’t know I’ve been affected.”

I had my golem grip a handful of copper ore, then I laid its hand atop the ground. The earth moved with a loud rumbling noise, gathering in the golem’s hand and forming the shape of a dagger. Emmeline—who was waiting down on the ground, seeing as she wasn’t used to riding a moving golem—shrank back in dismay.

I swung my golem’s arm around once—a warm-up before the real throw. However, waving its arm around made the rest of the golem’s body pivot ever so slightly to one side and then the other, putting its riders in a precarious position.

“Whoa!”

Cain caught me as I lurched forward.

This wasn’t good. Each toss was going to put me in danger of being thrown off my golem. I’d have trouble pinpointing my target if I was unsteady on my feet, so I had to figure something else out.

I climbed down from my golem, this time building an earthen tower with a spiral staircase wound around it. Or maybe “anthill” was a more apt descriptor than “tower”? Either way, it was taller than my golem, which made it just the lookout I’d wanted. Going up the stairs had left me a little short of breath, but I had to push through.

Emmeline came along this time since she didn’t have to worry about the tower moving anywhere.

“We’re quite high up,” she remarked as she surveyed our surroundings, taking

in just how far off the ground we were. Next, she tapped at the earth of the tower with her foot, assessing how firm it was. I, meanwhile, couldn't spare a moment to catch my breath; I jumped straight into my next move.

"One, two, and... here goes!"

My golem finally hurled its earthen sword. It drew an arc through the air, and once it had flown too far from me to maintain its form, it fell apart and rained down upon the Llewynians—as nothing but rocks and dirt.

Being pelted with a shower of earth from above was no picnic. Sure enough, the troops in the rear quickly fell into disarray.

I continued to catapult dirt anywhere I could reach, from the center of the Llewynian troops to the rear. It was nothing more than a downpour of soil, so there was no way for Lord Credias to tell what effect he was having.

Before long, even the Llewynians on the front lines had become a mess, and Alan's forces consequently had a much easier time forcing them back. And yet, Llewynne still refused to retreat.

Cain wondered about that himself. "I'm sure they'll have no choice but to withdraw once His Highness' troops arrive, but still... What's more, I've yet to see any sign of Salekhard."

"What about that group over there?"

Emmeline had a sharp eye; that was a master archer for you. I did, in fact, spot the green capes of Salekhard in the direction she pointed. Cain shifted his gaze to that cluster of men mixed in with the Llewynians. It looked like something was still bothering him.

When was Reggie going to get here? It wouldn't be long before the sun was high in the sky. I'd originally assumed he would be arriving before then, but our troops had yet to hear any word from him. Whenever news finally *did* arrive, it was sure to boost morale. Impatient, I peered out at the road leading toward the Alesia River.

It was right when I turned my gaze back toward Alan's men that something caught my eye.

Curious, I honed in on a cluster of trees lining the left bank of the river. There was nothing to see but a dense canopy of leaves, and—each time a breeze blew through—a glimpse of the ground and the water’s surface underneath.

As I was gazing out that way, I finally caught a glint of silver in the corner of my eye.

“Sir Cain! Take a look at that!”

Downstream, a short distance from the battlefield, a group of men in blue capes had come into sight. After taking a look in the direction I was pointing, Cain turned to Emmeline and instructed her, “Inform Lord Alan posthaste: His Highness is about to attack Llewyrne’s left flank.”

Emmeline dashed down the stairs of the makeshift tower without a moment’s delay. That ambush from the side was bound to deal a heavy blow to Llewyrne.

Relieved, I made to shift my point of attack. I figured the dirt and rocks would make for a good smokescreen, keeping Reggie and his men hidden right up until the moment they attacked.

“Ngh!”

But suddenly, my heart throbbed in my chest. Dangerously close to suffocating, I quickly called my golem to my side.

“Sir Cain, you have to jump over!” I frantically directed Cain toward my golem’s outstretched hand, then made the move myself, practically slumping forward onto it. Cain caught me right before I landed, stopping me from falling in headfirst. It would’ve been embarrassing to come out of this with a huge lump on my forehead, so I was grateful for the save.

“Are you alright?!”

“Lord Credias must have moved... We need to go somewhere else... so I can keep pretending I’m not affected...”

I rushed to put my golem in motion. Cain propped me up where I sat on its palm.

With each step, the pull of that invisible gravity weakened, both the asphyxiation and ennui gradually fading away.

“Hey, Master Horace... do you think he’s noticed?”

“Not necessarily. He might suspect something is up since you attacked from the rear today, but it’s probably fine. Just play it like you hit the time limit on your magic. He has yet to try anything of his own, so it’s possible he doesn’t know any spells that can be used for a direct attack.”

“Are there other kinds of magic?”

“Maybe. All I’ve heard of before is a spellcaster who could transcend time.”

“You mean, like... time travel?”

While listening to Master Horace talk, I’d gotten my breathing back under control. Still, I shuddered at the heat I felt gradually welling up throughout my body.

“We can talk about that later.”

At Master Horace’s prompting, I got ready to climb down from my golem so I could dismantle it, but first, I took one last look in Reggie’s direction. His march had come to a halt.

“What?! He’s already fighting someone?”

“Those are Salekhardian soldiers.”

Most likely, those men had been lying in wait for a while now. Only once they sprang into action did I finally realize that the Salekhardians had been lurking there all along. Had they disguised themselves somehow? I clicked my tongue, disappointed with myself for failing to spot them from above.

It would take more than that to put a stop to Reggie’s troops, however. No sooner had they split up into two groups than one of them marched out into the riverbed, heading upstream toward the Llewynians and launching their attack.

The remaining unit continued their battle against the Salekhardians. Reggie’s men appeared to be at a disadvantage in terms of numbers, so watching it had me on the edge of my seat.

“If Llewynne retreats, Salekhard will be forced to withdraw alongside them. Look over there, Miss Kiara.”

At some point, I had squeezed my eyes shut as I prayed for our men's safety; when Cain clapped me on the shoulder, I opened them again to look in the direction he was pointing. Unable to withstand Alan's onslaught, the Llewynians were falling back little by little. The Salekhardian soldiers fighting our troops withdrew alongside them. Reggie's men drew to a halt after a certain point, declining to give chase.

Relieved, I observed the enemy more closely. The Salekhardian troops, which had split up into a total of three units, were joining up at a spot a short distance from the river.

Where they were headed, there waited a group of men in green capes, mixed in with the black capes of the Llewynians. Nearly all of them were on horseback, so I assumed that was the backbone of the Salekhardian army. Was the new king of Salekhard somewhere among them? I gazed more closely to see if I could tell—but I really shouldn't have.

The rusty red color of one of the men's hair gave me a sense of *déjà vu*.

There were plenty of Llewynians with that shade of hair. We were at war now, but people would often travel between the countries to do trade during peacetime, so even some Farzians had a similar hair color. Thus, it wasn't all that unusual to see.

Still, thanks to my high vantage point, I had a perfectly clear view of him. I could tell how long his hair was. Even from afar, I could see the mischievous smile that rose to his face all too well... and it chilled me to the bone.

I swallowed down his name just as it was about to leave my lips, my whole body going ice cold.

"Are your symptoms getting worse, Miss Kiara?"

Before I knew it, I'd sunk down on the spot. Cain was worried for me, but I couldn't tell him what I'd just seen. After all, what if I'd been mistaken? What if it was just someone who bore a striking resemblance to him?

"I-I'm fine. Now that it's finally over, I just ran out of steam... I think." It was all I could do to answer him in a quivering voice.

I squeezed my cold, pale hands together, awash with despair.

*Why does he look so much like Isaac?*



Evidently, looping all the way around to attack Salekhard had been Reggie's plan from the start. Seeing as I had been deployed in advance, he had planned to take advantage of all the attention I'd drawn to strike. Under the guise of running late, he'd waited for Llewyr's scouts to finish scouring the area before marching ahead, but it turned out the Salekhardians had prepared a similar ambush.

"Who could have guessed they'd have the same idea?" Reggie lamented with a grimace after joining back up with Alan.

Nightfall was quickly approaching. Time had flown by, what with tailing the enemy post-battle, assessing how much damage had been done to our troops, and then eating dinner.

Reggie, Alan, Cain, Emmeline, and I were all gathered inside the same tent. I'd come by to check that none of them were injured, and I was relieved to find that that was the case. I had wanted to see them badly enough to force myself to eat despite my total lack of appetite, and now I had an upset stomach for my troubles.

Once he was done giving a rough rundown of the situation, Reggie looked over at me. "How are you feeling, Kiara?"

"Well..."

To be perfectly honest, my head was still a mess. I couldn't claim I was feeling well. It wasn't as bad as it had been the previous day, but my body still felt hot.

But if I let myself zone out, Isaac's face would pop back into my mind.

There was no way I could tell Reggie about any of that. I didn't want to seem off my game around him because he might tell me not to fight.

When I fell silent, Master Horace snickered. "Seems Llewyr brought along a spellcaster of their own. It's probably that viscount, Credias. His influence has had her mana spiraling out of control."

"Master Horace!"

“Didn’t think you could get away without telling him, did you? A spellcaster in the enemy ranks is something you have to report.”

He was right. Even if Master Horace hadn’t mentioned it, Alan would’ve informed him later.

“Her mana is spiraling? What does that mean, exactly?”

“The mana in her body was overstimulated, and now she’s showing fever-like symptoms. Isn’t that right, my little disciple?”

A beat. “Yeah.”

I had the chills. That had to mean I was running a fever, but I was so focused on my inner turmoil that I wasn’t really registering it.

“I think I’ll be fine after a little rest.”

I wasn’t lying. But Emmeline, who was sitting next to me, didn’t seem terribly reassured. “Then shouldn’t you be resting *now*? Unlike me, I doubt you could recover through sheer willpower alone. You ought to stay in bed until you’re fully healed.”

“Did you say ‘sheer willpower’?” Alan shot her a baffled look, then flicked his gaze over to me. I really wished he’d stop making that face that screamed, *You two are birds of a feather*.

Well, this *was* Alan’s first time meeting Emmeline. No wonder he was thrown for a loop.

It seemed Alan was in good enough shape to sweat the small stuff, at least. Of course, given that’d he been running all over the battlefield, he hadn’t escaped without a few light scratches and a whole lot of exhaustion.

“Go get some rest, Kiara. We’ll move out tomorrow. We can have you ride in a carriage on the way back to Fort Inion,” said Reggie.

Taking his advice to heart, I went back to my private tent.

With Cain to accompany me, I made my way down the nighttime road. I was apparently having trouble walking straight, seeing as he placed a hand on my back to keep me steady. He didn’t ask any questions.

Deep down, what I wanted was for *someone* to tell me that it wasn't true. And yet, there wasn't anyone I could talk to about it. This was the one thing I couldn't even tell Cain, the one who had promised never to stand in my way. Even if I wanted some way to know for sure, who was going to know anything about Salekhard?

*Wait. I do know someone who's an expert on Salekhard.*

"Do you know where Gina and Girsch are?"

"Shall I call for them?"

I nodded.

Both of them were Salekhardians. They had to know who their own king was. What's more, Gina had seen Isaac's face when she was looking for me in Cassia. Thinking back on how she'd reacted, I had a feeling she knew him somehow.

After I asked Cain to summon the duo to my tent, it wasn't too long before they showed up. Lila came along with them.

"Just leave this to us! It's girl talk, I'll bet. You ought to go get some rest yourself," Girsch said, clapping Cain on the shoulder. Cain made a face at "girl talk," but left without further comment.

Girsch and Gina came inside the tent, leaving Reynard and Sara to stand watch outside. Lila snuck in alongside them, snuggling up against me.

*Oh, that's right. Lila has the power to absorb mana,* I was reminded. I could feel the heat of the magic bubbling up within me draining away, finally providing me some relief.

Master Horace clattered unhappily, but Lila was lounging on the opposite side of him, so he didn't bother complaining.

Once everyone had taken a seat, I got down to business. "I'd like to ask you some questions about Salekhard."

Girsch and Gina beamed, happy to oblige. They probably assumed I wanted to know more about the country as a whole.

"What? So this *isn't* your girly gossip hour?" Master Horace butted in.



“If it were, I would’ve left you with Sir Cain.” After flashing him a wry smile, I asked Gina, “Did you recognize that red-haired man I met in Cassia? Or should I say... do you know him?”

Gina’s eyes went wide, and then it dawned on her why I’d called her here.

Girsch stood up. “If that’s what this is about, Gina is the one you want to talk to. I’ll stand watch to make sure no one comes near.”

After watching Girsch go, I murmured, “I didn’t realize Isaac was such a big secret of yours. You knew him from the start, and that’s why you were glaring at him back then, isn’t it?”

“Kiara, I...”

“I saw him among the Salekhard army today.”

Gina closed her eyes for a moment, then said, “Isaac is Salekhard’s reigning king: Isaac Vladlen Salekhard.”

*So Isaac... is the king of Salekhard?*

“Why didn’t you tell me back in Cassia? Given the way you were looking at him, you must have realized who he was.”

“It was a brief encounter, so I didn’t think it’d stick in your memory for this long. I assumed the two of you would never cross paths again.”

I balled the hands in my lap into fists. “I could never forget him. I’ve been thinking of him all this time. He was something of an oddball, but it was my conversation with him that inspired me to stick to my guns.”

“Wait, what? You guys talked for that long?”

Gina had assumed that Isaac had struck up a conversation with me while I was spaced out and nothing more. I was the one to blame for that; I’d avoided saying much about it since I hadn’t wanted to tell her the things we’d talked about.

When I nodded in response, Gina looked stunned. “I’m surprised he didn’t take off with you.”

“I was being careful. I made an awful comment about being scared to get near

a stranger, and he was still willing to hear me out after that.”

He had given me candy, consoled me, and even encouraged me to adopt a more positive attitude. Never for a second had I dreamed he could be an enemy.

“You were pretty down on yourself at the time. It must’ve made a lasting impression,” Master Horace muttered, thinking back on everything that had happened before and after our encounter. That was the one and only time I’d run off and made Gina drag me home.

“We saw each other at Fort Inion, too.”

“Seriously?!” Gina’s eyes nearly popped out of her head, and she slapped a hand against her forehead. Now that I knew who he really was, I shared the feeling. What was a *king* doing wandering around like that, completely defenseless?

“I wonder if he was just fishing for information.”

“He knows you’re a spellcaster, right? I figure he was planning to kidnap you, but who knows.”

The second time I ran into Isaac, he had made no attempt to abduct me or lure me anywhere. He had just talked to me and given me some sweets.

None of that changed the fact that he was an enemy, of course.

I’d thought we were friends. He felt like something of an older brother to me, in a different way from Cain, so the news had given me quite a shock. Everything else aside, if he was the king of Salekhard, it meant there was a good chance I would have to kill him in battle.

Gina let out a small sigh. “Since you’ve confided in me, it’s only fair for me to do the same. I’ll tell you why I hid the fact that I knew Isaac. The truth is... I’m the illegitimate daughter of a Salekhardian marquis.”

Her legal name was Ginaida. Her mother had been a servant working at the marquis’ estate, and the master of the house had laid his hands on her, leaving her pregnant with Gina. Not only had it been a nonconsensual affair, but Gina’s mother had also been convinced that the jealous wife of the marquis would kill

her if she found out. Thus, she'd fled from the estate and continued to live in hiding even after giving birth.

However, her mother was a fairly powerful person in her own right. Born in a village of hunters, she had made use of her skill with a bow and arrow to join Girsch's mercenary band. Thanks to that, the marquis—who had been specifically searching for a woman who used to work as a servant for a noble family—never managed to find her.

It was when Gina turned ten that her mother fell ill. To earn the money to pay for her medicine, Gina had taken up a sword and bow and had gone to work.

Taking a job as the beater in a nobleman's hunt had become the turning point in her fate.

"My face bears a strong resemblance to the marquis. And to make matters worse, he was right there at the hunting ground."

The marquis hadn't been searching for her mother out of love, Gina explained. If the child born to her was a girl, he'd wanted to find her as quickly as possible, raise her as his own wife's child, and use her as a pawn.

Once the marquis had discovered Gina, he had taken custody of her in exchange for promising medical treatment for her mother. Her mother had passed away a year after that, but Girsch had later informed her that he'd held up his end of the bargain and sent the medicine.

"Fortunately—is that appropriate to say?—the marquis' wife had already passed away by then. I had one half-sister, but she was perfectly happy so long as I sucked up to her, so I didn't have to deal with as much bullying as I'd expected."

That half-sister of hers, Natalya, had eventually been summoned to the royal palace to serve as a conversation partner for the crown prince, Yefrem. Piggybacking off that connection, the frail and sickly prince would often stay in a villa of the marquis' to recuperate, accompanied by the second prince, Isaac.

That was how Gina had met Isaac and Prince Yefrem.

"How should I describe Yefrem? He was the modest type. Not very confident in himself. He had something of an inferiority complex toward Isaac, who was a

robust, mischievous little rascal, always adored by the adults around him. I'm pretty sure that's the only reason he bothered talking to me."

Gina had learned to get by in the marquis' estate by fawning over Natalya, enough to seem like she was the girl's own personal servant. Yefrem's interest had been piqued by that behavior of hers.

Even after returning to the royal palace, Yefrem had found every opportunity he could to talk to Gina. By the time Gina had turned fifteen, the pair had finally realized they were in love with one another.

"Of course, there was no way we could actually be together. The crown prince and a nobleman's illegitimate daughter? Forget it. But he refused to give up on us. He turned down years and years of marriage proposals before he finally caved and got engaged to a duke's daughter—just so that Isaac wouldn't end up on the throne instead."

"What? But didn't you say Isaac was the king's second son?"

The only reason he was king *now* was because he had imprisoned the crown prince and usurped the throne.

"See, that's where Llewyne comes into the picture. You noticed the color of his hair, didn't you? He got that from his mother—a Llewynian princess."

Yefrem and Isaac were half-brothers.

"Llewyne is an aggressive nation. They'll marry off their princesses for political reasons, then attack that country as soon as their guard is down. Then they repeat the process all over again, marrying the same princess to someone else without batting an eye. And naturally, they'll tack on a justification that makes it impossible for the groom's side to refuse."

The marriage between Isaac's mother and Salekhard's former king had been brought about by a border dispute. Llewyne had forced the deal upon them almost immediately after the first queen had passed away, so many Salekhardians suspected that the entire conflict was just a pretext for Llewyne to marry their princess off.

Meanwhile, having been married four times now, Isaac's mother had been completely spent. In her third marriage, her husband had beaten her as a

means of venting his frustrations with Llewyrne. By that point, she had been broken enough to spill everything she knew about Llewyrne to the former king of Salekhard, crying and begging him to let her live in a corner of the royal palace in peace.

Physically and mentally exhausted as she was, it hadn't been long before she passed away. It was before that, however, that she had given birth to Isaac.

Isaac had presented yet another potential trigger for war.

"Some feared that Llewyrne would try to push Isaac as the next king. Isaac idolized his brother, so he did everything he could to keep himself as far from the throne as possible. That's why he proposed to me."

"What...? Does that mean *he* was your ex-fiancé?"

I recalled her mentioning a dispute over her engagement that had caused her to miss her window for marriage. *That was him?!*

"Yep. It was Isaac." Gina forced a smile. "If he took a bastard child as his wife, it would become that much harder to recommend him for the throne. Llewyrne had no choice but to throw in the towel. Isaac got engaged to me to protect his big brother."

For a time, everything had sorted itself out.

"But then Yefrem's betrothed passed away."

Allegedly, it had been an accident. After chasing down a fleeing cat, she had fallen from the castle wall and died. Immediately after that, Yefrem had received a marriage proposal from Llewyrne.

"His Majesty had always been faint of heart. Due to the frequent monster attacks at the time, he was deep in debt to the Llewyrnians, so he gave in without a fight. I think the one who took the decision hardest was Isaac."

"Even though the woman was from his mother's homeland?" I asked.

Gina shook her head with a bitter laugh. "Ever since he was little, he'd been treated like an enemy pawn by the nobles who hated Llewyrne. Isaac's grudge against the country is nothing to shake a stick at. Besides, the entire reason his brother's accession to the throne was under threat was because he had

Llewynian blood running through his veins.”

Whatever the case, the country of Salekhard had been at risk of being hijacked. Thus, Isaac had devised a plan to destroy the entire premise for accepting the engagement.

“Destroy it? But how?”

“He invalidated the agreement by killing his father, the one who made it in the first place. Then he usurped the throne and imprisoned Yefrem, leaving him in no position to get married.”

So that was the true explanation behind Salekhard’s internal squabbles.

“He broke off his engagement to me before he started putting everything into action. It was so that he could flaunt himself as an attractive marriage prospect to lure the other nobles to his side... and so that he wouldn’t drag me into it. But,” Gina went on, “I think the *real* reason behind it was that Isaac knew I was still in love with Yefrem. After all, he did ask me to be there for Yefrem once he was free again.”

“Does that mean Isaac plans to abdicate the throne one day?”

Yefrem could only be released if Isaac gave up his claim to the throne.

“That’s right. Once all the problems are taken care of, he plans to hand the throne back to Yefrem.” Gina hung her head, hiding her face from view. “By taking part in this war, Salekhard will have repaid its debt to Llewyrne. But if we don’t take responsibility for our invasion of Farzia somehow, the postwar reparations could bankrupt the country. Isaac will have to abdicate.”

If Farzia won the war, Salekhard would atone for aiding Llewyrne’s war of aggression by having its king step down. Since Isaac was the one who had made the pact with Llewyrne, it would be possible to have it annulled. The true king had been imprisoned at the time, after all.

“I was another part of the plan to reduce Salekhard’s burden.”

“What?”

“Sorry. Whether you picked me up or not, the plan had been for me to lend my services to Farzia somewhere down the line. The whole reason I tagged

along with you as a mercenary was so I could get Farzia to hire me without looking suspicious.”

“So you were looking for Farzia to employ you from the start? But why?”

“It’s more convenient for Salekhard if Farzia wins. It was so I could help that along... and so that I could make a name for myself.”

Gina was always so articulate, yet now she stared at the floor, like she was having a hard time getting her words out.

“You know how I keep monsters at my side? Isaac has always let me do whatever I want—maybe as penance for proposing to me for selfish reasons. That’s why I could do things like travel in and out of the mercenary band and raise Reynard and the girls. It makes me pretty useful on the battlefield, too. If I make a name for myself, then throw my weight behind Yefrem once he takes over, Farzia will think twice before crossing us.”

That made sense. If Évrard hadn’t already had a spellcaster like me, Gina would have been a pretty valuable asset—valuable enough to give Salekhard an advantage in reparation negotiations.

“To cover for me, summons were sent to mercenaries all over the country.”

Apparently, that was the reason Salekhard’s mercenaries had been issued a call to arms.

That concluded everything Gina had to say about Isaac.

“What do you think, Kiara? Did that tell you what you wanted to know?”

My head was spinning from all this new information. I *understood* it, sure, but it felt like we were talking about someone from a distant world.

“I understand his reasons, at least.”

“This means Girsch and I hid our circumstances from you, too. You aren’t mad at us?” Gina had an uneasy look on her face. It seemed she felt guilty about keeping things from me.

“No, I’m not.”

I gave her my best smile. After all, it wasn’t like she had outright lied, nor had

she violated her contract as a mercenary. Circumstances aside, if I believed everything she'd just told me, it meant that she had joined up with us to help Farzia win. And here she was, performing her job perfectly.

Gina had never been anything but kind to me, either.

"I don't doubt anything you've told me. It's just hard to think of the man you described as the same Isaac I know."

And yet, he was someone I'd been fighting against all this time. Gina seemed to pick up on how hard it was for me to accept the truth.

"If you met him back in Cassia, he might've been just the right person to lift you up when you were at your lowest point. So don't think of it as him having tricked you; think of it as you having used him," Gina said, doing her best to cheer me up. She was trying to convince me that I hadn't been taken in by his lies; I may have benefited from our talk, but there was no need for me to thank him, and there was nothing for me to feel hurt about.

But I'd never thought about anyone that way. I definitely felt like Isaac had done a lot for me, and it was hard to make the gratitude I felt just go away. Even assuming that his intentions hadn't been good, it was difficult to think of him as an enemy.

Picking up on my distress, Gina wrapped me up in a tight hug.

"I know you can't get over it that quickly. But don't worry; if I ever have to fight him, I'll get in a good punch for you."

What she said felt like a promise—we were going to have to fight Isaac sooner or later. He had his own reasons he couldn't back down from this war. Since Gina had promised to hit him for me, it meant she was fully prepared to face Isaac on the battlefield herself.

Wrapped up in Gina's warmth and Lila's soft fur, I thought to myself, *I need to steel my resolve to fight him, too.*

Depending on the circumstances, I might even have to kill him.



"What's wrong?" Alan asked before he could stop himself, still holding out a



wooden cup that Reggie refused to take off his hands.

When Alan, Lord Enister, and Jerome had been engaged in a post-dinner discussion about their next move, Reggie had seemed the same as ever. Now that he was alone with Alan, however, he would spend long stretches of time just spacing out. He had fallen so deep into thought during a lull in their conversation that he hadn't even noticed Alan offering him a glass of water.

Only when Alan spoke up did he finally lift his head. "Oh. My apologies, Alan."

"Are you still feeling off?"

A while back, Reggie had been shot with an arrow—not just any arrow, but one coated in a stone with the power to turn one into a spellcaster. Alan wondered if he was still feeling the effects of that, but Reggie shook his head.

"It's not that."

"Are you sure? Even Kiara was affected because Lord Credias was among the enemy soldiers. She lost the ability to wield her magic at will, and she was indisposed on top of it."

In order to become a spellcaster, one had to split a stone rich in mana between mentor and disciple and swallow it down. If the disciple skipped that step and attempted to absorb its power all on their own, the mana running through their body would spiral out of control, destroying their body from the inside.

Kiara hadn't actually split that stone with Lord Credias. Before becoming a spellcaster, however, Lord Patriciél had administered her a potion to determine whether or not she had the makings of a mage. Lord Credias had likely ingested part of the same stone used in that.

That explained how the viscount had assailed Kiara with a pressure strong enough to keep her from attacking him. Still, after hurling all that dirt, she had managed to throw the enemy into enough disarray that Alan counted it as an overall success.

And yet Reggie claimed that wasn't the issue.

"I'm not having the same problem as Kiara. What was coated on the arrow

that struck me was probably made from a different stone—one the viscount turned into sand and passed around to make more defective spellcasters. Shall we consider that a small mercy?”

“I certainly hope that’s the case. Then what is it? Are you worried about something?”

“Worried? I suppose you could say that.”

*Now this is unusual*, thought Alan. Reggie was constantly plagued with troubles, enough that he often failed to register them as worries at all. He filed the majority of them away as merely “matters to be dealt with.” Watching the prince cast his gaze downward, heaving sigh after sigh, Alan started to fear the worst.

It meant that Reggie didn’t have a solution for whatever had happened. If *he* didn’t know to deal with it, then Alan didn’t stand a chance. Alan was starting to lose his cool just thinking about it.

“What happened? Are you having trouble with the soldiers? Or is it the generals?”

If he was worried about the soldiers, it had to be the Delphion men who were the problem. Alan relived those bitter memories of simmering distrust laid bare on the battlefield. Of course, he couldn’t fault his own soldiers, either; he realized that accepting yesterday’s enemy as a new ally was easy enough to accept in one’s mind, but not so much in one’s heart. Still, if *that* was all it was, Reggie would surely find a way to smooth over the issue.

He also doubted it was one of the generals. The scrupulous, sensible Jerome would never start anything, and if Lord Enister were to make any sort of trouble, it would probably come down to that goat of his.

That goat was absolutely savage, for the record. Yesterday, it had gotten so riled up that it had charged ahead and ripped into the enemy with its teeth. A *goat*! What were the chances it was actually a monster in disguise? When he’d caught sight of it bleating as blood dripped from his mouth, even Alan had been left horror-struck.

At any rate, he couldn’t think of a single other problem beyond Reggie’s

power to resolve... or could he? One more idea suddenly occurred to him.

“Is this about Kiara?” Alan muttered.

Reggie’s eyes snapped open, and then a dry laugh escaped his lips. “You know me too well, Alan.”

He was right. Of course, all he’d done was voice the last possibility left after narrowing the options down, so he felt bad taking the credit.

“What did she do this time? I can go give her a talking-to.”

“Just listen to that. You sound almost like her mother.” Reggie giggled.

It was only then that Alan realized he had just said the equivalent of, *Has my little girl been making trouble for you?* Who else was going to step up to the plate, though? That mentor of hers was hardly a stern enough guardian for such a blockhead of a spellcaster.

“Oh, right,” Reggie suddenly added, “I sent one of my knights, Lowen, into Delphion’s castle town. I told him to get rid of Lord Credias through whatever means necessary.”

Evidently, Reggie had ordered Lord Credias’ assassination.

“Already?”

He was moving too fast. Alan couldn’t hide his shock.

“I’m not acting prematurely. If the viscount is indeed a spellcaster, there was always a chance he would show up to the battlefield. Kiara doesn’t have any recollection of him fighting, but that doesn’t completely discount the possibility. I’ve been hoping to get him out of the picture for a while now,” Reggie explained, his tone as casual as if he were saying, *You’re in the way, so move it.*

“You’re right, of course, but I didn’t think you would be in such a hurry.”

“Normally, I would feel the same as you. I’d be more inclined to wait until we’d found our footing to jump into action. But I’m not going to give him that much room to breathe. I don’t want to give him the chance to meet her.”

Reggie took a sip of water, then went on, “I’m sure Kiara has no desire to lay eyes on the person who was destined to become her shackles. She’s already too emotional under regular circumstances. I’d prefer to eliminate any potential

stumbling blocks.”

He was right that Kiara had been off-balance ever since departing Évrard. She had pushed herself to fight despite her fear of murder, constantly bringing herself to tears, yet whenever someone tried to give her a chance to rest, she’d just dig in her heels.

“I suppose she has calmed down as of late.”

Ever since they’d arrived in Cassia, to be more precise. Though she still came across as strangely impatient at times, the tension in her expression had eased. She seemed to have stabilized after Reggie conceded to her in Sorwen.

“I get what you’re saying about the viscount, but shouldn’t you go check on Kiara?”

Alan didn’t understand all the talk about *mana this* and *mana that*. All he had to do was listen to her explanations, visualize the effects on her physical condition, and determine whether or not that would hold her back in a fight.

But wouldn’t Reggie be considerably more concerned for her?

“Wentworth is looking after her. I should leave it to him.”

Alan *almost* bought that answer, but then he furrowed his brow, sensing that something was off about it.

Somehow, it didn’t add up.

Alan reflected on why that was. Outside of his bodyguard duties, had Reggie ever left any Kiara-related matters solely in Wentworth’s hands? On the contrary, he had been keeping a watchful eye on the knight, wary of any man who spent that much time around Kiara.

When Alan glanced over at Reggie, the prince answered with a guileless smile—enough to make Alan wonder if he had misheard him.

Alan grew so preoccupied that, in the end, he forgot to ask what had been bothering Reggie in the first place.



The next day, the Llewynians retreated to Delphion Castle. We Farzians

returned to Fort Inion.

While we were getting ready to evacuate the area, I headed over to the bank of the Alesia River. Now that we were on the heels of a battle, we had to be more cautious than ever, so Gina, Girsch, and the frostfoxes joined Cain and Emmeline (my new overseer) in accompanying me.

I couldn't afford to take up too much time, but still I said, "If we just leave these corpses lying along the riverbed, the resulting plague won't be a pretty sight to see."

To my greatest delight, mosquitoes didn't exist in this world, but the last thing we needed was for the water to be contaminated. The nearby villagers and townspeople may have gone to wells for their drinking water, but some people would still use water from the river throughout their daily lives. If disease spread downstream, the citizens of Delphion would be in trouble.

"I'm impressed, Miss Kiara. Where did you come upon that knowledge?" Emmeline asked, standing witness to my ritual for the first time.

*How am I supposed to explain this one?*

My eyes darted back and forth until Cain finally threw me a lifeline.

"After moving to Évrard, Miss Kiara read a great deal of the books in our archives. I'd assume it was outlined in one of those. Isn't that right?"

"Yes! Exactly!"

I gave a little *let's go with that* nod, and Cain shot me a dryly amused look. Emmeline seemed to buy the explanation.

"The margrave's library, hm? I'm sure there were plenty of old records there."

"Yes. I even found journals belonging to the margraves of old."

I had, in fact, devoured so many of those books that I didn't have to scramble for lies to tell.

"Delphion has a much shorter history than Évrard. The inside of the castle was completely refurbished, and there aren't many old records left over."

"Why not?"

“Delphion used to be part of the territory of Fergus. When the marquis of Fergus turned against the king, his house was laid to ruin. One of the contemporary king’s retainers was the head of the House of Delphion; he was given a peerage and a cut of the marquis’ territory to rule.”

While I listened to Emmeline tell the history of Delphion, I created a golem out of stone and had it gather up the bodies a short ways from the riverbank. Some enemy corpses had been left submerged in the water, so I decided to pile them together and bury all of the men in one place.

There were a handful of bodies I couldn’t do that for, seeing as they’d been crushed a little too thoroughly. Considering how many of those mangled corpses were concentrated along the riverside, I had to assume I was the one responsible. I *had* run them over with a stone dragon and all.

“Sorry. It must have hurt.”

I felt bad, but if I were put back into the same situation, I knew I would do it again. I didn’t regret what I’d done, but I started to wonder if there was a less painful way I could have killed them.

“Don’t let it get to you, kid. That’s just what happens to your enemies in a war. Even the men who didn’t choose to be here knew what they were getting into. Besides, if you’d been on the other side of it, I bet you anything the enemy wouldn’t be feeling sorry right now,” Master Horace said, punctuating the statement with a villainous chuckle.

Once a soldier took a weapon in his hand, there was always a risk of this happening. I knew that, but it didn’t make it any less sad.

I buried all the disfigured corpses right where they lay. As for the bodies I’d gathered in a pile, I created a giant hole and put them into the earth together. A large mound of dirt popped up in the riverside grove.

That was when a few soldiers passed by after doing their rounds, on the lookout for scouts who might be hiding somewhere after missing their chance to run. As soon as they spotted me, they started whispering among themselves.

“What’s she doing?”

“Didn’t you hear the generals? The spellcaster performs a magic ritual after

every battle to keep disease at bay.”

It sounded like the “magic ritual” interpretation had stuck.

“But those are enemies!”

There were a lot of people who weren’t happy about me laying the enemy to rest. Lord Azure was like that, too. Perhaps he found some kind of meaning in abandoning corpses to rot and leaving the wretched remains of our enemies on display.

However, it seemed the patrolling soldiers were Ernest’s.

“Then again... if Lord Finard had fallen in line with the baron, we could have died enemies. Better to see them buried, in that case.”

One wrong step and they would have met the same fate. It was a thought that would only occur to the men of Delphion, whose very own province had been divided into friends and foes. Still, even if their motivations were self-centered, I was happy to see a few more people approving of my funerals.

That was when I finally noticed that Master Horace was patting me on the side reassuringly.

*Thanks and all, but that’s a little uncomfortable, Master Horace.*



After that, it took us two days to get back to Fort Inion. We had to carry the injured, and our soldiers were exhausted from the battle, so we had to slow the pace of our march.

Once we arrived at the fort, Alan and the generals put the soldiers to work. They set up tents between the inner and outer walls, creating more places for the men to sleep. Seeing as the number of our troops had increased, just the rooms in the fort would no longer be enough to accommodate everyone. I offered to make a shelter that wouldn’t require us to put up tents, but given what poor shape Lord Credias had just left me in, nobody took me up on it.

“Keep yourself in tip-top shape, and in the meantime, think of a plan for next time,” Alan responded, bluntly turning me away.

But, as was my custom, I refused to give up. I was worried about the area

near the gates, so I tried constructing a stone hut there.

“Kiara?”

Unfortunately, that was when Reggie stumbled across me.

“Weren’t you instructed to get some rest? The meeting should be starting soon. Why don’t we head there together and wait?”

With a smile on his face, he grabbed me by the wrist and dragged me along with him.

Once we’d entered the inner fort, I noticed something was a little strange. Considering there hadn’t been any sort of attack on the fort, the soldiers who had stayed behind were looking awfully apprehensive.

While I gave a puzzled tilt of my head, we headed into the hall in the main tower, which we would be using as our conference room. After everyone had arrived, Lord Azure started us off with his report.

“There was a fire inside the fort?” Reggie parroted back.

Lord Azure, who had been left in charge of the stronghold, nodded. “A fight broke out among fellow soldiers, which escalated into murder.”

The section of the tower that had gone up in flames in the middle of the night was where firewood was stored for the winter. Autumn had only just begun, so there wasn’t a huge amount of kindling in storage. However, dead bodies were found among the charred remains.

“Two soldiers died. Someone had witnessed them fighting earlier, so it seems likely that the fire from their lanterns spread to the kindling during the incident, killing both of them.”

Seeing as one of the soldiers involved hailed from his own territory, Lord Azure apologized to Reggie in hushed tones the likes of which I’d never heard from him.

Fights would break out every now and then. After all, thousands of men had gathered in one place, each one of them prepared to go fight for their lives. The tension and fear would sometimes drive them toward less-than-upstanding conduct.



Generally, I had someone like Reggie or Alan around, so our soldiers were careful not to show us that side of themselves; plus, Cain would always steer me away from any fighting that did break out, so I'd never actually witnessed one of their brawls. Ever since Girsch came along, I *had* sometimes caught sight of the mercenary holding a counseling session for soldiers with bruises on their faces or lumps on their heads.

However, this was the first time a brawl had caused a fire and led to deaths. That explained why the soldiers who'd stayed behind in the fort had seemed a bit off.

It wasn't an enemy attack or anything, so Lord Azure ended his report there. One of Reggie's knights, the sandy-haired Felix, didn't seem satisfied with his explanation. Once the meeting was over and the marquis had left the room, I overheard him whispering to Reggie. He was skeptical about why no one had noticed any of the fuss before the pair burned to death.

"They were quite thoroughly roasted, I hear. Are we to believe that no one noticed the stench or the smoke from the burning firewood, leaving them be for long enough that they burned to a crisp?"

What an incredibly disturbing explanation I'd just listened in on. I did my best to chase the thoughts from my head before I could picture it.

"Do you suspect that he neglected to look into it, shrugging it off as a trivial matter, or that he gave me a false report? Hmm. Perhaps we should go visit the scene of the crime."

Reggie stood from his seat. Then he threw a glance to where I stood nearby, issuing me a warning.

"I'm sure you'd like to know what's going on, but you should be resting, Kiara."

He probably knew I'd been eavesdropping from the start.

"No way! I'll be too curious to sleep!"

I couldn't go back to bed after hearing such a juicy tidbit. There was a chance Lord Azure was hiding something from us! I wanted to have them bring me along, if I could. I made puppy dog eyes at Reggie, and with a helpless laugh, he

turned his gaze toward Cain, who was standing behind me. It was like he was asking, *Is that alright with you?*

I felt a pang in my chest, just like I had when I was getting permission to go to Alesia. I didn't understand why I was so upset, either. Was it because I didn't want him checking what I was allowed to do with someone else? That didn't seem fair. I knew that Cain had better judgment than I did.

Whatever the case, that conversation was enough to make Reggie give up on sending me to bed.

"Alright. Let's go together. It's safer to do this than have you sneak a peek on your own later."

With that, it was decided. Reggie and I would go check out the scene of the crime.

There were several places to store fuel inside the fort. Among those, the site in question was located in the northern part of the inner fort. The bodies had been cleared away, so the only traces of the incident were the black soot and the stench of smoke permeating the walls and floor.

Felix briefed Reggie on where exactly the bodies had been found. I stepped out of the room and glanced around. If Lord Azure rushed over here now, it would mean he was hiding something. After all, that would be a huge overreaction, considering Reggie may have only come to take a look out of idle curiosity.

Why would Lord Azure need to lie, though? What with how fanatic he was about Reggie and the royal family and all... Besides, with a voice that loud, I doubted he could hide anything to save his life. It seemed more likely to me that he'd taken his men's report at face value and dismissed it as a trivial matter.

Reggie performed a thorough inspection of the room, and nobody came by in the meantime. With our business finished, we decided to head back and filed out of the room.

I was more relieved than anything. There was a chance that Llewyrne would be attacking the fort soon, so the fewer things we had to worry about, the better.

“Is Llewyne going to attack, you think?”

The battle of Alesia had more or less ended in a draw. It was unlikely that Llewyne would be withdrawing from Delphion just yet.

Reggie responded to my mutterings. “They have Salekhard on their side, so they could attack if they wanted to. That said, they may choose to stay holed up in the baron’s castle until they can call in troops from the neighboring territories.”

The word “Salekhard” caused yet another pang in my chest. It was upsetting to think that someone I’d considered a friend had thought of me as nothing more than a source of intel. I couldn’t have anyone else finding out about that, though. It meant I’d have to tell them about Gina, too, and then she and Girsch would be cast under suspicion.

I believed that Gina and Girsch were trustworthy. After all, Gina herself had said, “Once my foxes have taken a liking to someone, it’s almost impossible to make them attack that person. It’s their one weakness. Though of course, that’s what makes it possible to tame them in the first place.”

That wasn’t a lie. Master Horace, who hated frostfoxes more than anyone, had backed it up.

“Still, I’d prefer to do something about the viscount of Credias before our next fight.”

“We have his defective spellcasters to worry about, too. Why can he make so many of them now?” I wondered aloud. It was a question that had sprung to mind several times before.

Had he discovered a huge stash of contract stones? Perhaps he’d been lucky enough to strike a rich vein. According to Master Horace’s explanation, they were similar to fossils, anyway.

“There aren’t many who can stand against a defective spellcaster. The fewer of them in the fray, the better. We can handle one or two, but beyond that?” Groul sighed. “I’ve heard there was another vial of the sand that gives birth to defective spellcasters found in Fort Inion, where the hostages were being held. Just how many of those stones does Llewyne...?”

Groul trailed off, and the rest of us came to a halt alongside him. When we looked straight ahead, we saw someone standing in the entrance to the main tower.

It was Ada. I hadn't seen her for a while. I sensed a greater severity in her expression than before, but only for a fleeting moment.

With a blissful smile, she declared, "I've learned bits and pieces about why Llewynne is producing all those defective spellcasters." After waiting to observe the looks on everyone's faces, she turned to Reggie and went on, "Would you like to hear it, Your Grace?"

Her question was directed at Reggie, but Felix took a step forward and answered it before he could. "Yes, that sounds very interesting. Let's move this conversation elsewhere."

Felix smiled sweetly and grabbed Ada by the wrist, but she was insistent on speaking with Reggie.

"What? No! I want to talk to His Highness!"

"Take care of it, Felix. I'll be expecting a report later."

Refusing to give her the time of day, Reggie headed for the main tower while Felix was holding her back.

*Is he that bent on avoiding Ada? To be fair, it's a little scary that she was camped out waiting for us.*

But then, Ada yelled out something that stopped him in his tracks. "If Kiara Patriciél hadn't run away, none of it would have happened!"

I forgot to breathe for a moment.

*What does she mean, "if I hadn't run away"?*

I couldn't even get out a whisper. All I could do was stare blankly at Ada.

She wasn't looking back at me. Her eyes were fixed on Reggie.

Reggie gave an order to Felix, who was still holding Ada by the wrist. "Take her to an empty room. Groul, go call for more men."

"Understood."

Reggie walked off, following after Felix. I watched him go in a daze, only snapping back to my senses when Groul gave me a pat on the shoulder.

“Are you alright, Lady Kiara?”

“Oh... Yes.”

My voice came out unsteady, trembling ever so slightly, and Groul’s face clouded over at the sound of it.

“Wentworth. Make sure she gets some rest.”

“I will.”

At Groul’s prompting, Cain led me into the main tower. When he gave me a push from behind, something suddenly occurred to me.

“Hey, Sir Cain? There’s something I want to ask Sir Groul about, actually.”

“You want to know what she was just talking about? I figured. But there’s a good chance no one is planning to tell you anything. And naturally, no one is going to let you sit in on the conversation, either.”

I did my best to stay put, digging my heels in, but Cain just picked me up and passed through the tower door.

“Why?! It has to do with me! She just said that!”

“It’s *because* it involves you.”

I would’ve done anything to stay rooted to the spot, but I stood no chance against a man who trained day in and day out. In the end, he took me up the stairs, carrying me like luggage under his arm.

But as it happened, I was bad at giving up.

“If I’m involved, of course I’ll want to know about it!”

“Please stop struggling, Miss Kiara.”

“What else am I supposed to do?! I want to hear what Ada had to say, no matter who tries to stop me! There might be something I can do with that knowledge!”

I had to do whatever I could to stop more defective spellcasters from being

born. I was tired of having to kill people to save them.

I flailed and kicked my legs like a captured dog, but Cain wasn't about to let me go. Before long, he had taken me all the way back to my room. I had been plotting to make a run for it the moment he set me down, but my plans were foiled when he lifted me up, ready to fling me down onto the sofa. I was stunned.

"Eep!"

My yelp brought Cain back to his senses, and he opted to set me down gently instead. I stared up at him from the sofa, too startled to say anything.

After glancing off to the side and heaving a sigh, he looked back down at me. "My apologies. You were putting up such a fight that I defaulted to treating you like a younger Lord Alan. In any case, please calm down. His Highness may try to hide the truth from you, but if you truly want to know, I can look into it. I promised you as much, remember?"

I nodded. *That's right. Cain is on my side.*

"If you try to force your way in, you'll just be sent away. It'll be easier to get Groul to talk if I simply inquire about it later." Cain gave me a pat on the head. "Don't worry; I won't break my promise. I'll do everything in my power to ensure you can keep fighting. Understood?"

"Ngh... Yes. I've cooled down a bit."

"Besides, judging by that woman's tone and the general circumstances, I can more or less guess what she has to say."

"Huh?"

"When she says 'it' happened because you ran away... rather than the defectives themselves, I imagine she's referring to his attempts to create a new spellcaster."

"Who's 'him'? Lord Credias? Wait. Do you think he wanted a replacement for me?"

Was that it? In my absence, he had created one defective spellcaster after another in a desperate search to replace me.

It seemed that Cain had more than just that in mind. “If he’d only been experimenting to create a new spellcaster, I could wrap my head around it. I’m more interested in why he’s so fixated on taking said spellcaster as his bride.”

“That’s a good point. If all he really wanted is another spellcaster, there was no need to marry me.”

*PLEASE don’t tell me the answer just comes down to his tastes. I’ll seriously have to suspect him of pedophilia. It’s way less disturbing to assume he just wanted my power as a spellcaster.*

Cain mercilessly dashed my hopes. “This is just a guess, but I’m assuming the viscount had a reason he was so obsessed with you.”

“Yuck.”

*Great. So Lord Bullfrog screams “pedo” even from an outside perspective.*

“I doubt this ‘Ada’ knows many details herself, but once we hear her testimony, we’ll be able to make a more educated guess. I’ll go find out. That said...”

As he stared down at me, Cain reached out to pinch my cheek.

“Mmph?!”

*It doesn’t hurt or anything, but why?!*

“I made a promise to you, but you still don’t trust me. Why is that?”

“Erm, well... I’m sorry!”

*Okay, now why is he still pinching my cheek? I’d already apologized, yet he refused to let go.*

“Are you really?”

“Yes!”

I hoped that would be enough to make him stop, but instead he turned his head to the side and started cracking up.

*That’s so mean! He’s totally laughing at me!* I puffed out my cheeks, full sulk mode engaged. Cain finally released his grip, as though his fingers had been repelled by the air pressure. After staring at me in disbelief for a moment, he

laughed even harder, doubling over and clutching his stomach.

At least he wasn't pinching my cheek anymore, but I hadn't intended to give him something to laugh at in the process. I grew even more indignant.

"Quit laughing, Sir Cain!"

"But... I've never met a girl... who fights back like *that*! Haha!"

*Excuse me! Are you trying to say I'm not normal?! Maybe he has a point, though. Do I not know how to act like a girl?!*

Just as I started to fret, Cain finally stopped laughing and said, "Wait here, then. I might be a while, but I'll do my best to make it back to you by dinnertime. Don't leave your room until then."

"Ouch!"

Once I'd nodded my agreement, Cain delivered a flick to my forehead before leaving the room.



## Interlude: What Was Touched by Flame

Ada was brought somewhere inside a tower close to the main one. It was an unpolished room, its stone walls laid completely bare. The only furnishings were a single desk and a few backless chairs. Ada was less than satisfied with the arrangement; she'd hoped to be taken to Prince Reginald's room, not *here*.

Once she had been forced to sit and enough time had passed to make her wonder if he wasn't coming, Prince Reginald finally showed up.

He wasn't alone, however. Ada had anticipated that his captain of the royal guard, Groul, would accompany him. But why had he brought Emmeline Finard along, too?

When Ada failed to mask her displeasure, Emmeline dispassionately informed her, "There's a reason I was called here. When a woman is summoned to a private room to be interrogated, her reputation could be damaged if there are no other women present. This was the prince's kindness, so you'd do well to accept it."

Now Ada understood. She was so delighted to hear that Prince Reginald had shown her consideration, she didn't doubt the explanation in the least.

"Well then, I'd like you to tell us everything you know."

Prince Reginald sat down across from Ada, turning his gaze toward her. Overjoyed to have those blue eyes fixed on her, Ada broke into a smile as she nodded.

"I was there for a Llewynian attack on Trisphede Castle. The countess allowed me to use a secret passage to escape." As she recited the script she'd been given ahead of time, Ada hung her head in a pretense of sadness. "There were Llewynian soldiers closing in on us, so Lady Trisphede stayed behind to let me get away. She was afraid that if she were nowhere to be found, they would scour the room until they happened upon the passageway. It wasn't long before I heard the sounds and shrieks of the countess being captured... and then I

overheard one of the Llewynians say something.”

She paused there, glancing upward to get a glimpse of Prince Reginald’s reaction. Satisfied with the pity she saw in his eyes, she continued her story.

“He said that she might be what the viscount was looking for—that she might satisfy the conditions to become a spellcaster.”

“The what?”

“He claimed that ‘chances’ were better with a daughter of nobility. After some time, the very viscount he’d mentioned showed up, but that’s where the trouble started.”

Ada swallowed to wet her throat, dry from all that talking. Would the prince really believe her? *No, of course he will*, she was convinced. Enough of the truth was mixed into her story, after all.

“Someone said, ‘If we can turn her into a spellcaster, she’ll make for a good pawn.’ Then I heard the countess’ screams and the sounds of a struggle... And that’s when I heard this ‘viscount’ say it—that if only he’d had Kiara, he wouldn’t have had to bother with this. He wouldn’t have had to use up valuable shards to create these pale imitations.”

*Now he’ll understand*, Ada thought. If he had Kiara serving him as a spellcaster, Prince Reginald had to know what the process for becoming one was. Going by her account, he would determine that the countess had had her aptitude for magic tested and died as a result. He would realize that if Kiara had stayed with the viscount, he wouldn’t have attempted to turn anyone else into a spellcaster.

If word got out, perhaps the victims of all those defective spellcasters would come to resent Kiara, laying the blame on her. Kiara would lose ground, and Ada, who had provided all this information, would become a more valuable asset to the prince.

“It was too late for the countess, so I went ahead and used the secret passage to escape from Trisphede Castle. When I made it back to my own province, however, I found it had already been occupied... and that was as far as a weak woman like me was going to get. I was swiftly captured.”

Having finished her tale, Ada drew a deep breath. It had been incredibly nerve-racking to weave a lie under all that scrutiny—even if she knew it was a necessary step in luring Prince Reginald to her side.

After hearing out her story, Prince Reginald appeared to be deep in thought. As she stole glances of him closing his eyes and folding his arms, it was all Ada could do to keep herself from grinning.

Eventually, the prince asked her, “You mentioned a soldier saying that ‘chances are better with a daughter of nobility,’ yes?”

“Y-Yes! That’s right! He did. He said something else, too... Something about how they’d be fine even if the Farzian army came along, I believe.”

Reginald stared at Ada, his eyes widening. “Can you remember what exactly he said?”

“I can try... but a good bit of time has passed now, and the first thing that comes to mind is simply how scared I was at the time. But if I remember correctly, he mentioned something about you, Your Grace.”

“About me?”

“With a little more time, I might be able to recall what he said... In any case, I’ve wanted to tell you all this for a while now, but that knight over there always stopped me.”

There was genuine hatred in her eyes as she stared at Felix, but he just returned her gaze impassively. What a wretched fellow. She had to be allowed by Prince Reginald’s side; otherwise, she would never be able to save him. And yet, this man always stood in her way.

Ada thought she had politely conveyed that she had no desire to speak to Felix, but Prince Reginald just smiled and said something to the opposite effect. “If you do remember, I’d like you to relay it to me through him. Also, be careful not to disclose anything we’ve talked about here. There isn’t a single one of my men who would violate the orders I’ve given them. If any word of this gets out, you’ll be the prime suspect.”

With that, he stood up and left the room.

Dumbfounded, Ada was escorted back to her room by Felix.

That wasn't how it was supposed to go. She'd expected a different reaction, after giving him so much information. How curt he had been.

"Perhaps... that won't be enough."

Still, if she had to pass everything on through Felix, it was going to be a long while before she could get through to him.



The next day, Ada walked through the morning mist to her destination: the chapel. Seeing as it was right near the tower where she was staying, no one could give her a hard time about going outside. That man always came by to worship around this time of day, so it was easy to establish contact with him.

Once she was inside the chapel, Ada waited for him to finish his prayer before the altar.

The moment he rose to his feet, she called out to him. "Good morning, Lord Azure."

Niven, the marquis of Azure, looked back over his shoulder, a shadow of apprehension crossing his face when he saw Ada. He then asked her in an unusually quiet voice, "I heard that you were taken in for questioning by His Highness. It wasn't about that fire, was it? I told him it was a trifling matter yesterday, and he has yet to ask me for any further details."

Ada had to stop herself from laughing at the marquis, so petrified of getting on the prince's bad side.

"Worry not, Lord Azure. I didn't mention your name. I simply created more opportunities to talk to him, all so we can lead His Highness back to the right path—to get him to walk the same road as us, rather than rely so much on that spellcaster."

"Well, good." Lord Azure heaved a sigh. "It's important for His Highness to be exposed to new ideas, but it's no good if it's always the same person giving him advice. He ought to consider our feelings toward the enemy and reassess whether or not there's a need to have them buried. Showing our foes the

gruesome, rotting corpses of their comrades is bound to inspire greater fear among their ranks.”

He was mincing his words, seeing as it concerned his beloved prince, but it was clear what he actually wanted to say—he couldn’t stand laying the enemy to rest.

After the battle to recapture the fort, Lord Azure had nearly gotten into an argument with the spellcaster, Kiara. Ada, who had witnessed the scene from atop the fort walls, had decided to use that to her advantage.

Sure enough, all she had to do was put on a show of dismay over the enemy burial, praise God, and glorify Prince Reginald, and the marquis had become putty in her hands. He was fully convinced that she was a fellow believer, devout enough to wake up early each morning to worship in the church.

“Did you say anything about the fire?”

Plus, thanks to *that* incident, Lord Azure had come to see Ada as a confidant.

Ada was the one who had actually caused the fire. When she had been wandering around the fort in search of information, she’d gotten into an altercation with a soldier. He had dragged her into the firewood storage, at which point she’d done away with him by setting him ablaze. She’d taken out the witness who had made a move to stop her, too.

Once the deed had been done, Ada hadn’t been sure what to do next. She’d used a lamp to set fire to the remaining wood, then fled the scene as soon as the burning straw and wood had a good blaze going. It was on her way out that she’d bumped into Lord Azure.

She’d clung to the marquis, instantly putting on the façade of a frail woman who had just been assaulted, and he’d fallen for it hook, line, and sinker. The men involved had hailed from the marquis’ territory, making it even easier for Ada to steer the conversation in her favor. She was perfectly positioned to exploit his weakness—that he didn’t want to report his own negligence to the prince.

“I no longer believe that His Highness will listen to anything I have to say, I’m afraid. I barely qualify as a noblewoman, so I suppose that’s only to be

expected. Therefore, I'd like to call on your help to get me closer to His Highness."

"What sort of help?"

"I'm going to entrust you with some information I overheard regarding Llewyn. Verify its accuracy, if you would. Once you have... I'm sure everyone will grow more interested in whatever else I have to tell."

## Chapter 3: The Delphion Festival

The next day, Lord Azure's troops left the fort. Evidently, he'd been tipped off about a trap laid by the Llewynians.

The tip had come from Ada. When she was being transferred to Delphion following her capture in Trisphede, she'd overheard a strange comment from one of the soldiers... or something like that. Reggie didn't seem to mind that particular tidbit being passed around, so I managed to find out about it from Cain, who had heard the details from Groul.

On top of that, Ada had listened in on one of Lord Credias' conversations before she was captured, and Cain had managed to extract that piece of information, too.

"So nobles make for the best spellcasters?" I asked. That had come up in Ada's intel. "Have you heard anything like that before, Master Horace?"

"You mean that baloney about how nobles have a higher probability of becoming a spellcaster? Hah! I don't buy it for a second. Heeheehee!" Master Horace, who was sitting atop the plain wooden table, gave a hearty laugh and kicked his legs with little clacking noises. "If it were true, every country's aristocracy would be full of spellcasters by now. If the odds really were in their favor... I'd say maybe one in ten of them would have the aptitude. Plenty of nations would be willing to sacrifice their own relatives in droves if it meant winning a war, and before long, those wars would turn into nothing but giant magic battles. And we don't see that happening, now do we? No way there's any truth to the rumor, then. Mmheehee!"

"That's what I thought. Plus, it's dubious whether I could really be considered a noblewoman."

Master Horace wasn't an aristocrat, either. Thus, the information seemed pretty suspect.

I set my elbows down on Master Horace's table and groaned. "Then why are

people saying that?”

“I assume the facts got twisted as they were passed along,” Cain suggested from where he sat across from me.

I nodded as I considered that. Perhaps a passing thought along the lines of *Hey, maybe it's easier for them?* was taken to be the truth somewhere down the line, and those rumors escalated over time. If so, I wondered what they had started out as.

“If it's not nobles, then what about women?” Nobody was saying the condition absolutely *had* to be met or anything. I mean, we already knew Lord Credias was a man. “Is it possible that women have a higher likelihood of becoming spellcasters?”

“Hmm... Now that you mention it, my mentor *was* a woman.” After thinking it over for a bit, Master Horace shook his head. “I couldn't tell you what counts as a significant statistic. My mentor took on a lot of male disciples, but when five of them died and only I survived, she stopped looking for new pupils.”

“Five?!”

“Even then, she claimed those were unusually good odds for landing on a potential spellcaster. Over twenty of *her* fellow pupils met their end, according to her. Heeheehee!”

Spellcasters' disciples dropped like flies, from the sound of it.

“That reminds me... Why did you become a spellcaster in the first place, Master Horace?” I asked.

The expression on his clay face never changed, but I got the sense that he was grinning all the same. “To make it through life. Heheheh.”

For how much of a chatterbox he was, Master Horace rarely talked about his past. It seemed like he'd rather just forget about it. In other words, he hadn't led a very fortunate life before becoming a spellcaster's disciple. If he'd made the leap knowing how many disciples died in vain, perhaps he'd been in a situation where he would've died regardless if he hadn't given it a shot.

“There may be some truth to the idea that women have better odds of



becoming spellcasters, if we consider the way Lord Credias conducts himself. It's possible he spread his own amorous rumors to give himself a cover for repeatedly gathering up women and experimenting on them," Cain said.

That would explain some things.

"Thinking back on it, having me drink the sand might have been another part of his indiscriminate experiments."

The first time I'd been forced to drink the sand had been before I was taken in by Lord Patriciél. Perhaps he'd tried it on a perfect stranger like me simply because I was a girl.

I realized one other thing, too. My stepmother had consented to Lord Patriciél's experiment knowing full well I could die. Whether I died or survived, it was a sure way for her to get rid of me. Plus, if I just turned into sand, she wouldn't have to bother with hiding the body.

"You know what that means?" Master Horace said, making a clinking sound as he crossed his arms. "They gathered up a bunch of women and girls in this fort, and to top it all off, one of the guards even had a vial of sand on him. And we already know the viscount was in Delphion. Maybe they were planning to experiment with making some new spellcasters."

Master Horace's point brought a bitter taste to my mouth. So *that* was why Ada had blamed me.

"Is it really my fault?"

All of it had happened because I'd run away. Lord Credias had wanted to get his hands on a spellcaster so badly, he'd started handing out contract sand left and right. Did his luring Master Horace into a trap and weaponizing mass-produced defective spellcasters trace back to me, too? If I had become Lord Credias' magical minion, would fewer people have died?

Was there a way I could just go back in time and get married to Lord Credias? And if I did, would there still be any way for me to save Reggie? Perhaps I could earn his trust, then warn him that Llewyrne might attack Évrard. If he knew I was someone close to the queen, maybe it would lend more credibility to the idea that I'd leaked the information. Or would he just refuse to hear me out to begin

with?

While I ran all sorts of what-if scenarios in my head, an image suddenly popped into my mind: Reggie hanging out in a beautiful white mansion. I was there, too—and sopping wet, for some reason.

I told him, “You shouldn’t waste your time worrying about me.”

He just smiled and answered, “Saying that only makes me worry all the more.”

The scene vanished from my mind the moment Cain spoke up, offering a few kind words. “You were right to escape. Anyone would run if they knew they were going to die. If you hadn’t... then yes, perhaps those people wouldn’t have been sacrificed. But I refuse to think it would have been better for you to have taken their place. If anyone tries to blame you, I’d like to ask them this: ‘Aren’t *you* just trying to survive at the cost of Kiara’s life?’”

As I listened to what he had to say, I found myself caught in yet another daydream.

This time it was Cain, pinned underneath rocks, dirt, and a collapsed building.

*No! Why am I seeing this?!* I shuddered, and the vision faded from my mind as suddenly as it had appeared.

“Are you feeling alright?” Cain placed a hand on my back, concerned.

“Err, yes... I’m just a bit tired.”

Unsure how to explain what I’d just seen, I swept it under the rug.



The next day, Lord Azure returned after foiling one of Llewyn’s traps.

Purportedly, the Llewynian army had traveled to a small village further down the high road, where they’d swapped out the residents for their own soldiers. Whenever the Farzian troops marched into the vicinity, the Llewynians had been planning to supply them with poisoned food and strike while they were writhing in agony.

Lord Azure had brought some of the Inion townspeople along with him, and

after confirming that nobody there was a real villager, he had wiped out all the disguised Llewynian soldiers.

Nothing of the sort had happened in the RPG, as far as I could remember.

I was frustrated that I hadn't been of any help to Reggie on that one. Meanwhile, I started to hear about Ada receiving a summons from Reggie more and more often, even witnessing it myself on occasion. I knew full well that he was just trying to tease out anything else she may have remembered, but there was something else that made it harder to swallow.

I heard that Ada was making some very bold advances on Reggie.

It was when I was making a visit to Emmeline. She wasn't there, but I did see Lucille, who was staying in the same tower of the fort. While the two of us were chatting, I heard voices from over by the stairs.

"Have you no interest in cooperating with His Highness?"

One of the voices was Emmeline. Her tone was as calm as ever. In contrast, frustration was plain in the rantings of her conversation partner—Ada.

"I do want to help him! But I risked my own life to obtain this information. Now that I've all but lost my home, this is all I have to my name. Of course I'd use it to get what I want! Besides, it's hardly any of *your* business."

It sounded like Emmeline was criticizing Ada for revealing too little of her hand to Reggie... *But wait, there's more?*

"You are sorely lacking in discretion. If you were born and raised in a noble branch family, didn't anyone teach you the value of modesty?"

"His Highness doesn't mind it. The only ones who got upset over that embrace were you and that hard-headed knight. So," Ada went on, "surely you can overlook me simply asking for a kiss?"

*A kiss?!*

My hands flew to cover my mouth, a shriek nearly escaping my lips. When I looked over, I saw Lucille doing the same thing. We exchanged glances, the both of us turning bright red.

Anyone would feel awkward overhearing something so personal. It probably

wouldn't have been any less uncomfortable if we'd been around for it, either.

Master Horace was there with us, too. He muttered, "Brandishing her feminine wiles, eh? She's a vixen, that one."

"What do you mean, a vixen?"

I'd heard the term thrown around in this context in my past life, too.

"A sly woman who hunts down her prey with her own fangs, if you know what I mean. Eeeheehee!"

Emmeline's tranquil voice overlapped with Master Horace's furtive laughter. "Don't you care if anyone else sees? You're causing a great deal of trouble for His Highness."

"It's your own fault for refusing to leave. It's not as if I particularly wanted to give you a show."

*She "didn't want to give her a show"? Does that mean she was doing things she shouldn't let people see?!*

A feeling of unrest grew in my heart.

"What choice do you give us? Your behavior is egregious. You're only going to make things worse for him."

"Shouldn't His Highness get a say in that? Also, you needn't tag along each and every time just to clear my name, Lady Emmeline."

"Won't that become a problem for you once you're to be married?"

"It makes no difference to me. Why, I'd be *delighted* if rumors of me and the prince got around."

"Oh, Ada..."

Emmeline fell silent, unsure what to say after that.

As off-the-wall as she was, Emmeline understood what was and wasn't accepted practice in the world of the nobility. She would never deviate from those norms herself; hence why she was so taken aback, I assumed.

"The other day, my dear Emmeline was theorizing that Miss Ada grew desperate after losing everything," Lucille murmured, a glum expression

overtaking her sweet, beauty-marked face, “and that His Highness has realized as much.”

*Oh. So Reggie is worried about her.*

On the one hand, I understood how Ada felt. Only when one had lost everything did they feel they could do just about anything. I was of the same mindset when I ran away from my boarding school.

“If she *is* that desperate, ’course she’d be out to curry favor with the most powerful patron there is. I bet the prince doesn’t mind having a woman falling all over him, either! Mmheehee!” Master Horace agreed with Lucille, tacking on a weird comment on the end.

My mind conjured up an image of Ada seducing Reggie, which stirred up some unpleasant emotions within me. What was the right way to describe this feeling? Was it like watching a female friend getting hounded by a man?

Reggie was no ordinary citizen, though. No matter how Ada pleaded, Groul and his knights would always be hanging by his side. That meant the worst-case scenario could never actually happen... right?

Then again, I’d been alone with Reggie plenty of times before. We’d spent a lot of time reading books together when we were still kids, so I’d always just thought of it as an extension of that. Still, there was no guarantee that he wouldn’t end up in a similar situation with Ada. Plus, if Master Horace was right, and Reggie really didn’t mind it, then...

From then on, I felt uneasy whenever I saw Ada around. Thus, I did my best to stay away from Reggie, too... but I had to come by on business that day. It was actually Groul I had to talk to, but he could usually be found wherever Reggie was. I climbed the stairs of Fort Inion’s main tower, heading for his chambers.

Before I could make it to the top, Reggie came out of his room. Ada was right behind him. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, and alongside her more mature looks, it gave her a bewitching sort of aura. It was obvious that the wholly contented look on her face wasn’t because she had Felix to escort her back to her room.

The way she gazed at Reggie, who had stepped out of the room ahead of her,

spoke volumes.

Although I ducked out of sight as fast as I could, I still caught Ada's eye for a brief moment, and I could have sworn she flashed me a triumphant smile. Maybe I was wrong to take it that way. Yet for some reason, the more I thought about it, the deeper I felt myself sinking into despair.

Reggie started pleading with her to reconsider her actions. "We plan to retake Trisphede eventually. You needn't resort to selling your body like this; one day your house will be restored to its former glory. In preparation for that—"

Ada cut him off with an embrace. "I don't care about my house! All I need is you!"

"There's no need to be so anxious. Won't you trust us a little more?"

His face set in a frown, Felix moved to pull Ada off of the prince, but Reggie held up a hand to stop him. Then, with a troubled smile, he placed a soothing hand on Ada's back as she nestled against him.

Watching that confirmed it for me: Reggie was worried about Ada.

Whether he was comforting me, encouraging me, or trying to coax me, Reggie would always wrap me up in a familial embrace to put me at ease. That was all it ever took to soothe my heart, sometimes enough to make me cry. It always made me believe that, despite our disagreements, Reggie wasn't going to turn his back on me.

Now he was doing the same thing for Ada. Did that mean he thought of us the same way?

"We're the same?"

I wasn't special. Thinking about it like that, it felt like the floor had suddenly dropped out from underneath my feet. I was so scared that it was all I could do just to stay standing.

That was when Master Horace murmured, "If he's not brushing her off, either he's too kind for his own good, he's up to something, or she's won him over. Now this is getting interesting."

"You think she won him over?"

Supposedly, he couldn't deny Ada what she wanted because he was bargaining for her intel. Still, part of me had felt that he wasn't acting like himself. Knowing him, he could come up with an infinite number of reasons to refuse anything he didn't want to do. So why wasn't he doing that with Ada? Because he was too kind? Because she'd won him over?

The longer I thought about it, the harder it was to bear. All of a sudden, I desperately needed to confide in someone. But who could I even talk to about this? Cain popped into my mind first, but I had a feeling he was the wrong person to tell.

What about Gina and Girsch, then? Those two were far more worldly-wise than I was; perhaps they could explain what had me so scared.

The moment the idea occurred to me, I rushed out of the main tower.

"Hey, Kiara! My little disciple! Calm down a second!" I was pretty sure Master Horace had called out to me several times during my mad dash. "Look, I'm sorry! I shouldn't have said that! I was so entertained that, for a second there, I forgot you were just a teenage girl!"

After I'd run all the way across the courtyard, it turned out Gina and Girsch weren't with the injured soldiers. I was about to go look elsewhere when I bumped into someone.

"I'm sorry!"

"Miss Kiara?"

As soon as I'd shouted my apology, I was about to take off running again, but whoever it was grabbed me by the arm and held me back.

It was Cain. "What happened? Is it an emergency?"

"No... I'm looking for Gina."

"For Gina? Did something happen?"

How was I supposed to explain this? If I told him how panicked and anxious I was, Cain would just get worried.

"Is it something you can't say? Even to me?"

That put me at even more of a loss for words.

It wasn't that I didn't trust Cain. I just didn't know what to say. I considered how best to explain it, but I was so overwhelmed by everything that had happened that I just whimpered, ready to burst into tears at any moment.

"Ngh..."

I covered my face as I tried to stop myself from crying. The next moment, something was draped over my head, dyeing my entire field of vision in blue. *Isn't this the same color as our capes?*

After covering me up with his cape, Cain foisted me off on the person next to him. "We couldn't possibly ask *you* to go fetch her, so please stay here and watch over Miss Kiara, milord."

"Huh? Sure, alright."

I heard footsteps moving away. Probably Cain's.

Alan was left puzzled by this sudden development. "Hey, Kiara... why don't you have a seat somewhere? Alright? Just calm down."

This had to have been a real hassle for him—you know, getting saddled with a whining girl wearing a sheet over her head. His kind concern pushed me over the edge, the tears finally spilling from my eyes. I was truly lucky I had the cape to keep my face hidden.

"Waaah!"

I wanted to apologize, but I couldn't get the words out through all the wailing.

Alan heaved a sigh. "What are you, a child? Come this way, Kiara."

He tugged me away by the hand. Seeing as I was wearing a cape over my head like some kind of ghost costume, I couldn't tell where anything was. I just let Alan push me around by the shoulders, and eventually, he sat me down on a stone platform of some sort.

"I have no idea what happened, but pull yourself together. What could you even be crying about? We aren't going to battle yet. Did you get into a fight? Or was somebody picking on you?"



“What? A fight?”

Why would he assume I’d gotten into a fight with anyone?

“It’s the way you’re acting. I saw it happen often enough whenever the knights’ children came by to play, so I jumped to conclusions.”

From the sound of it, he was treating me like a little kid blubbering over an argument. Part of me didn’t take issue with that, though. There was something oddly comforting about it.

My tears finally began to subside.

“It wasn’t a fight. I just... well.”

I was probably just lonely. Watching that had made me feel like I was getting left behind. I was worried that he might never look my way again.

That was when I finally understood: perhaps the apprehension I was feeling was that of a child who didn’t want to be separated from her parents. I wanted Reggie to stay my guardian—and only *my* guardian. But now, he had someone else to look after.

It was easy to figure it out when I likened him to my past-life dad. There were things I’d assumed he did specially for me, so if I saw him doing that for another child, I would have taken it pretty hard. But of course, Reggie wasn’t actually my father. Besides, he *had* to be patient and reassuring with Ada, if he wanted to get the information on Llewyrne out of her.

Now that I’d determined the reason behind my distress, I once again decided that I needed to keep a lid on it. Reggie already had his hands full with the war; I couldn’t cause him more trouble on top of that.

“Sorry. I’m just a little homesick. I miss the good old days, y’know?”

“What good old days?”

“I don’t mean anything from *here*. I’m talking about my past-life family.”

I’d only said it to cover my tracks, but I was immediately gripped with a genuine longing. I would wait at home, and before long, Mom and Dad would get back from work. Being a teenager and all, there were things I didn’t want to talk to them about, but if I ever needed something, they would always listen.

Whenever I was feeling lonely, I could just stick to them like glue. We were family, after all—connected by blood.

Reggie, meanwhile, was no relation of mine.

I clenched my teeth, my tears drying up completely.

Reggie thought of me as a special friend, one he could pour his heart out to. That was the very reason he'd always comforted me whenever he sensed I was lonely. If we were friends, though, that meant I needed to stand by his side without any help.

When had I stopped thinking about it that way? Was the reason for my sudden misgivings because I had just lost another friend?

Isaac was the one who had convinced me to win everyone's approval through a show of power. He had to have known I was his enemy. Why had he cheered me on, then?

Thinking about Isaac made the tears well up all over again. Just as I was scrubbing them away from behind the cape, Gina and Girsch showed up. Girsch handed the cape back to Cain, told him they would take over from here, and led me to a nearby spot of shade.

Cain seemed pretty concerned. However, knowing he had left me in capable hands, he took his leave with Alan.

Naturally, Gina and Girsch asked me why I'd been crying. Since I'd already figured out the reason without their help, I just told them I was homesick. Now the problem was what to do about my puffy, reddened eyes.

"You couldn't help rubbing them, could you? Gina, be a dear and make us some ice."

"Thanks, Mama Girsch."

"Did you just call me 'Mama'? Oh, I'm so happy! Say it again!"

Giddy with delight, Girsch wrapped me up in a big bear hug.

"Girsch, watch it! That hurts!"

Girsch had a strong build, so a squeeze that tight was pretty painful. *Can you*

*loosen up a little?!*

It was still kind of nice, though. After all that crying, I felt like I'd gone back to being a pampered kid for a bit.

"Sorry, dear! When you say cute things like that, I just can't help myself." Girsch played it off with a bout of refined laughter. "Anyway, don't you have business to be taking care of? You can't go showing a face like that to the men around here, so let's hurry and get you fixed up."

I got a strange sense of déjà vu, like this had all happened to me before.

Then, I realized: I was thinking of Fort Clonfert. I had been crying after the battle when Reggie tossed his cape over me just like Cain had, insisting I not let anyone see my face like that.

"You're right. I bet my face isn't a pretty sight to see right now."

Everyone around me would be alarmed and concerned at the sight of my puffy eyes.

"No, you silly girl. That's not the issue," Gina said, laughing as she handed me a handkerchief she'd asked Reynard to freeze with a puff of his ice-cold breath. "If you let men see vulnerability plain on your face, some of them are going to get up to no good. Bad guys know best that taking advantage of a girl's moment of weakness is the easiest way to win her affections. You don't want to lose yourself in the moment and end up regretting it later, do you?"

"Exactly!" Gina and Girsch tacked on in chorus, like they were on the same page.

"Wait... *That's* why?"

So, back then, Reggie hadn't been trying to cover up my ugly face? He'd just been worried I was going to let somebody seduce me?

"Besides," Girsch added, "it's hard to ignore a crying girl. Most soldiers keep their distance because you're the spellcaster, but if you remind them that you're a young woman before anything else, it could make more trouble for you down the line."

That was a good point. Some men might try to approach me, taking me as

helpless and weak. If that perception of me spread throughout the soldiers, I wouldn't be able to wander the fort freely for too much longer.

“Oh, that's right.”

That reminded me what I'd been on my way to do in the first place. There were plenty of women here who *couldn't* go out whenever they pleased, for the sake of their own personal safety. To help them stay in shape, we were now giving them a chance to walk around the fort courtyard on the days we didn't have to go to battle. Whenever it was time, I would talk to Groul and have him loan us a few knights to act as our bodyguards; hence why I had been looking for him just now.

I rushed to cool the skin around my eyes with the handkerchief Gina had given me. If I went to see the girls of the tower with a tear-stained face, it'd probably just upset them. They already had enough anxiety to deal with, what with being uprooted from their normal lives.

Of course, the swelling wasn't going to go down just like that. Since it was bound to take some time, I explained the situation and asked Gina to go find Groul for me. I felt pretty awful, making her go out of her way for me like this.

By the time she got back, Girsch had given me the “de-puffed” seal of approval, so I went to go meet the girls with Groul and three of his fellow knights in tow.

After their period of imprisonment and the depressingly fraught days that had followed, the former hostages hadn't been looking too good. Ever since the Battle of the Alesia River, however, the life had returned to many of their faces. I assumed it was because the baron's heel-face turn had given them the opportunity to reunite with their families.

Only Lady Delphion, whose dark-brown hair was pulled back into a tidy updo, still looked tired and worn.

“To turn his blade against His Highness, even just once... If I'd known things were going to end up like this, I would have struggled harder against my captors—no matter if it cost me my life. Oh, whyever did I hesitate? Death would be but a relief now!”

Even if the branch families had fallen into line as well, the one to bear the most responsibility would be the baron himself. Just thinking about it left his wife anguished.

“Didn’t I tell you that wasn’t the right time to lay down your life, Auntie dearest? If you’re going to sacrifice yourself, you have to aim for the moment with the maximum impact. It was clear that your life alone wouldn’t have been enough to turn things around.” Emmeline bluntly confronted Lady Delphion with the facts, rendering her speechless.

*Uhh, was that supposed to be reassuring?*

She was basically saying, *You couldn’t have made the situation better by dying, so it’s fine that you didn’t commit suicide.* It was hard to tell if there was any real compassion in Emmeline’s words, but they were enough to encourage Lady Delphion to take a walk with the rest of us.

While we took our leisurely stroll in the sunny courtyard, Lucille asked me, “Are you feeling alright, Lady Kiara?”

“What? Yeah, I’m doing great!”

Had she noticed I’d been crying? Sweating internally, I gave her my best smile.

That seemed to put her at ease. She beamed back, her smile akin to the soft sunlight filtering through the trees. She was just the cutest thing. I couldn’t help but envy Emmeline, whom she looked up to like an older sister.

The longer I talked to Lucille, the more my loneliness faded away. As soon as I returned to my room, however, it all came flooding back to me.

I was jealous of everyone else for having such wonderful families. Was it because Ada had once had the same that she was so desperately searching for something to hang onto now? She needed someone to fill in for the family she had lost.

But did it have to be Reggie? I knew I was in no position to say it, but I couldn’t stop myself from thinking, *Please, you can have anyone but Reggie.*

Almost as if he had sensed what I was feeling, Master Horace murmured, “I’m with you all the way, kid.”

I got what he was trying to say, and it brought a smile to my face. “I know. Thanks. I’ll always have you, so everything’s okay.”

Master Horace would be by my side until the day I died. His declaration reminded me that I *did* have a beloved family of my own. Even if we weren’t connected by blood, we were linked by mana.

Whispering my gratitude to my kind mentor, I hugged his clay body tight against my chest.



“Apologies for the trouble.”

“Not at all. I’m honored to be of any help to you, Your Highness.”

After she was admitted into Prince Reginald’s chambers, Emmeline gave a quick curtsy and took a seat.

“Still, it’s a lot to ask. It can’t be pleasant to get mixed up in the love affairs of another, whether it’s for the sake of buttering someone up or not. Thinking ahead, I don’t particularly want to keep someone like her close by, either. She has quite the tendency to make assumptions; I’d hate for her to misconstrue a passing remark and go shout it from the rooftops.”

“I fully understand. It’s of the utmost importance that your reputation not be tarnished. Really, though... She’s stubborn enough to make you wonder if someone else put the ideas in her head.”

Prince Reginald, who was sitting across from Emmeline, didn’t look quite as concerned as he’d claimed. And yet, piecing together the rest of his mannerisms made it clear: deep down, the prince was annoyed.

He kept idly tapping his finger against the rim of his teacup. While it was likely a subconscious tic, it was a sign of his emotional unrest. The prince wasn’t the type to reveal his true self, which was why he was hiding his frustration, Emmeline assumed. He wanted control over the way he came off to others.

If it were Kiara in her place, she would ignore everything else and simply take the prince at his word. If he was smiling, she’d believe he was happy, and if he looked pained, she’d assume that he was.

As Emmeline imagined it, everything finally clicked into place: *that* was why Prince Reginald trusted Kiara. Not everyone hoped to meet someone who could see through to their innermost depths. There were some who felt most at ease when others bought into the image of themselves they tried to project. The ingenuous Kiara must have made for a very comforting presence.

Emmeline couldn't rest unless she was picking people apart and developing her own schemes; if that was the kind of man Prince Reginald was, then she was likely someone difficult for him to trust. Still, so long as her inquisitive mind was making her a useful vassal, he would be sure to treat her well. Thus, Reginald handled Emmeline in much the same way he did his knights—something along the lines of, *If you're going to see through me anyway, I'll leave it to you to guess what I'm thinking.*

And so, having detected his feelings on the matter, Emmeline had chosen to take on the job of keeping Ada in check.

Emmeline felt that she had messed up where Ada was concerned. The girl wore her heart on her sleeve, so initially, Emmeline had assumed that she was just stressed. That it was just a harmless crush.

In reality, the girl was so far gone that there was no telling what she'd do next. In a sense, she was a truly frightening person. Failing to see that from the outset had been Emmeline's mistake.

"I do regret allowing her to get so close to you and Lady Kiara in the first place. I hadn't realized how blindly devoted she was. For now, I'll keep as close an eye on her as I can."

Emmeline suspected that being around Kiara had only sent Ada spiraling further out of control. If she hadn't allowed her to so much as exchange words with Kiara, perhaps Ada would have recognized her as someone a station above her own. Never would she have entertained those delusions of taking Kiara's place by the prince's side.

"I'm lucky you're such a rational person. Now I can execute my plans for the baronship with confidence."

Clearly he was satisfied with Emmeline's response to the situation. Just the other day, he had made her a proposal that offered the utmost consideration to

both her and her province.

“You have my thanks for showing such leniency in the face of my family’s transgressions. On behalf of my father and uncle, I once again offer my most humble apologies and swear our allegiance unto you.”

“Bringing Delphion under my direct control would only create more hassle for me, and furthermore, Lord Ernest *did* lend our forces a hand. I’m hoping to reward you personally as well; if there’s anything you desire, let me know.”

Emmeline hadn’t suspected he would make her an offer *this* advantageous. She couldn’t hide the shock on her face.

“Are you surprised?” Reginald asked with a mischievous giggle.

Of course, Emmeline was too much of a contrarian to admit as much. Above all else, she was eager to capitalize on this opportunity to make her wishes known.

“I’m most grateful. In that case, if you know of a man who would make for a suitable heir to the House of Delphion, please introduce me. Our family has grown far too weak-kneed. I’d like to toughen them up by ushering in a new wind.”

“I’d imagine you’re more than enough for the job yourself. You have extraordinary foresight—as evident in how the House of Delphion conducted themselves in all this.”

Prince Reginald’s comment hit the bull’s-eye, and Emmeline responded with a rueful smile. Evidently, the prince wasn’t naive enough to attribute everything to her uncle’s and father’s own judgment.

“I won’t deny that, in the precarious situation we were faced with, I aspired to the House of Delphion’s continued existence—whether it be the main house or a collateral line.”

Emmeline chose to readily admit the truth. She had devised a plan that would allow for her family to keep living on this land, no matter if the House of Delphion fell into Llewyrne’s hands or if Farzia took it back.

First, she had had her uncle, the baron, swear allegiance to Llewyrne. That was



the only way to keep his entire family—right down to the dependents—from being murdered. To that end, she had allowed herself and her aunt to be captured. She had known it would leave him no choice but to submit to the enemy nation.

At the same time, she'd instructed Lucille to deliver a message to her own father, Ernest: *Don't try to rescue us until there's a change in the status quo.* After weathering a Llewynian assault, there was a good chance that Évrard would be raising an army, so he was better off joining up with them.

If Llewyrne won, the baron would be rewarded for swearing his allegiance early on. It was possible he'd be left with somewhere around half of his territory.

On the Farzian side of things, if they were strong enough to fight their way to Delphion, a little extra help would be all they needed to wrest the territory back from Llewyrne's clutches. There would be no getting around the fact that the baron had defected, of course, so they would be forced to pay some form of recompense. Still, Emmeline had counted on Lucille being young enough to be spared, a direct descendant though she was.

It had all been a gambit to let Lucille live, if no one else, ensuring their line's survival—and it had worked out even better than she'd expected.

"As a means of apology, I plan to do everything in my power to aid you."

The first one to react to Emmeline's confession was Alan, who had been quietly watching all of this unfold. "She's pretty sensible. That's a big difference from Kiara," he muttered under his breath.

Prince Reginald took him to task for the slip of tongue. "Do you always use Kiara as your baseline?"

There was an inscrutable something mixed into Reginald's smile, and Emmeline wondered if she ought to point out that his mask was slipping. Or could it have been something the prince was showing them on purpose? Either way, it certainly deserved careful examination.

Alan laid out his thought process, seemingly oblivious to the prince's change in demeanor. "The only other women I'm particularly familiar with are Maya

and Clara; there's not a normal one in the bunch. I was only surprised because I'd pinned Lady Emmeline for the same sort as Kiara."

Emmeline lifted an eyebrow at the blunt response.

This was Prince Reginald's childhood friend and cousin. For the person boasting the longest history with this complex prince, he wasn't anything like Emmeline had expected. No matter how straightforward he seemed on the surface, she had assumed he would be a craftier sort.

Thus, she couldn't help but laugh. "Why, I'm honored to fall under the same category as Lady Kiara."

"Egads. You *are* a weird one." Alan seemed vaguely appalled.

"If you put it like that, Alan, wouldn't that make Kiara weird, too?"

"Obviously. If there's anyone out there who would claim otherwise, I'd love to meet them."

Groul and Felix found that assessment a little harsh, judging by their tight smiles. But Emmeline and everyone else there knew: Alan had built a strong enough bond of trust with Kiara that he didn't have to mince his words. If Kiara had heard his comment, perhaps she would've protested with, *That's mean!* but she wouldn't have been genuinely offended. In fact, she seemed more likely to shrug it off with a laugh. After all, she knew that candor was just another form of Alan's friendship.

"But, hmm... she never gets mad when I call her that, so at least it's a good, self-aware sort of 'weird,'" Alan added with a laugh.

Emmeline caught herself smiling.



Llewyne didn't try anything for two more days.

Between the carriages delivering food, the merchants, and the former staff of the fort, there was a steady stream of people coming in and out of the fort from the town of Inion.

Consequently, it was hard for anyone to stand out. With how bustling the place was, even Ada, who was known for wandering the fort grounds, had no

trouble slipping into the crowd. Nor did the man who took a small, folded piece of paper off her hands.

Said man had been hired by a merchant family. Once he had received the slip of paper from Ada, he promptly quit his job and left town.

He was headed for Delphion Castle.



A few days had passed. Having just received word that Llewyrne and Salekhard had retreated from Delphion Castle back to Trisphede, cheers rang all throughout the fort.

“What joyous news! Hahaha! After their most recent loss, surely uncovering their ambush was the final straw—HRK!” Lord Azure exclaimed, only to be silenced with a jab to the arm from Lord Enister’s cane.

“Enough, lad. You know there has to be a catch here. But all the same... storming a castle is never an easy undertaking. We’re better off seizing it while we have the chance.”

“True. In which case, I’d like Lord Delphion and Lord Enister to take the lead. The rest of us will get ready to vacate the fort, then follow after you,” Reggie instructed.

Per the prince’s orders, Lord Delphion and Lord Enister departed first. The rest of us left the day after that.

We spent three days on the road, always keeping a careful eye out for any Llewyrnian activity. Along the way, we received word from Lord Enister that he hadn’t run into any issues inside or outside the castle, so we proceeded straight to Delphion’s castle town.

The castle town was encased in towering stone ramparts, a remnant of the time when fellow lords of Farzia had fought among themselves. As soon as we passed through those gray walls, we were showered in the voices and gazes of the gathered townspeople.

“Long live Farzia!”

“Long live Prince Reginald!”

Swathed in that chorus of welcomes, I got the sense that everything else around me had been drowned in waves of sound. I was disoriented by the overwhelming pressure, a very different sort than I'd grown accustomed to on the battlefield.

"Is something the matter?" asked Cain, who was once again sharing a horse with me.

"No. It's been a while since I've heard a commotion that wasn't just shrieks and battle cries, that's all."

Sorwen had to have been the last place I'd experienced anything like this. By the time we'd arrived in Cassia, the citizens had been in no state to give us such a warm reception, and Fort Inion had been a good distance from the town.

"It's nice to know we're so welcome here," Cain said. "It's been a few months since they were occupied; if they were happy with Llewyr's rule, I doubt they would be receiving our troops with open arms like this."

I gave a curious tilt of my head. "You think they could have *preferred* being under Llewyr's control?"

"Delphion didn't put up much of a fight. Assuming that few civilians were killed and no unreasonable restrictions were placed upon them, they could have grown accustomed to Llewyr's rule over time. The average townspeople cares far more about how well their rulers treat them than about history or tradition."

He had a point. If their lives had only been enriched as a result, some people were bound to welcome the change in regime.

"That said, Delphion *does* frequently send us men to fight our wars against Llewyr. I'm sure a great deal of their population bears a deep-seated antipathy to the nation."

Whether that counted as a good thing or not, I was relieved to hear it. Not that I wanted the townspeople to have suffered under Llewyr's rule or anything, but if we had fought our way here only to be given a cold reception for our troubles, I might've broken down crying.

Once again, riding double with Cain drew me plenty of curious looks. The

Llewynian troops had withdrawn a good distance by now, but I'd still been ordered to ride with Cain for the sake of a quick getaway... you know, just in case anything happened. The second I'd tried to get on my own horse, I'd gotten a real earful from Alan. *You're too slow!* and *You don't know how to dodge!* and *As if I'd ever permit something so risky!*

At this rate, though, I was going to forget how to ride a horse by the time the war was over.

While I fell deep into thought, we followed the main cobblestone road to Delphion Castle.

The castle was surrounded by a large moat. The water was drawn from the river and flowed steadily in one direction, giving it a less muddied look than one might typically envision.

We crossed the stone bridge, just wide enough for one carriage to pass through, arriving outside an open gate. Reggie and his knights proceeded after the vanguard. Alan entered the castle next, Cain and I trailing behind him.

Once we had passed through the gates, I threw a casual glance over my shoulder.

"Oh!"

For a brief moment, I felt like I was looking at new scenery. Smoke billowed from the castle town, and the cityscape was devastated in several places. Everything had been consumed by the fires of war. The corpses of fallen soldiers littered the area outside the gates, and the stone bridge was dyed crimson and black.

Past all that, I saw a dragon on a blue flag, as well as—

"Miss Kiara?"

Cain's voice brought me back to reality. All that time I'd spent looking behind me, I'd just been staring at the gate from over Cain's arm. No wonder he'd found it strange.

"Is something bothering you?"

"No... The scenery just reminded me of a picture I'd seen before."

Surely that was the reason for my hallucination. Thinking back on it, there had been a battle at Delphion Castle in the RPG. Now that the Llewynian forces were gone, however, the siege wasn't going to happen.

If I remembered correctly, this was where Alan had fought against Game-Kiara's golem. It must have been that scene that had sprung to mind.

While I was drawing my own conclusions, we finally stepped foot inside Delphion Castle.

Lord Delphion's troops had performed an inspection of the castle interior back when they first arrived. No traps had been found, so we headed off to our assigned rooms after a short break. Lucille showed me the way.

"The room on the right is mine, and the one next to it is my dear Emmeline's. Feel free to come play whenever you like, Lady Kiara."

"I'd love to... but wait, was that always your room?"

"No. Whichever Llewynian stayed in my room took all my things out and threw them away, so I'm taking the opportunity to move to a new one."

The castle may have been handed over to Llewyrne without a fight, but despite all the baron's behind-the-scenes efforts, it hadn't escaped some damage via remodeling or the disposal of certain bits of decor.

"Emmeline said we're just lucky that nothing was drenched in blood or burned to ash. Just a few touch-ups and the place should be ready to be used again."

"She does have an eye for efficiency."

"I'll strive to learn from her example."

Lucille, who wanted nothing more than to grow up into a second Emmeline, gave a calm assessment of the matter. Still, it had to be sad for her to have what should've been her own personal sanctuary ravaged, her belongings cast away. I figured any other girl Lucille's age would've been left in tears. What a tough cookie.

"If there's anything you want remade out of stone, let me know. I'd be happy to help."

“Oh, in that case...”

What Lucille asked me to make was, for some bizarre reason, a statue of a terramouse.

*Where is she even going to put this in her room? Not that it makes any difference to me.* I had zero artistic ability, but so long as it was something I could envision it in my head, I would have no problem materializing it. I promised her I’d make it for her.

While I was having my peaceful chat with Lucille, Reggie and his men were busy milling about. Merchants from the town had flocked over, requesting to greet the prince, and now they were swamped trying to accommodate that request. Some of our men had suggested leaving it for a later date, but Alan said it was better to meet them sooner rather than later, seeing as we needed all the money we could get during wartime.

Each soldier’s pay was covered by his respective province, but there were plenty of other things—provisions, for example—left to pay for. Those funds could be procured from some of the more well-off merchants of the town, so snubbing them wasn’t an option.

Supposedly, the royal family tried not to borrow too much from the nobility. The way the system worked was that territories were given tax exemptions proportional to the expense of the troops they sent over. Thus, if the royals took too much, there would be less income for them to collect the following year, and they wouldn’t have the money to cover the costs of reconstruction.

Not only had the royal capital fallen into the hands of the enemy, but the fight to take it back was bound to put even more areas in need of repairs and restoration. That was going to take a lot of money. Therefore, rather than relying on the contributions of our allies in the nobility, they were better off collecting donations from merchants. On the merchants’ side of things, gaining the monarchy’s favor now would give them a ticket into the royal capital later, so they were more than happy to do their part.

The next day, after all of that had been settled, I was summoned to the great hall of the castle. It wasn’t just Reggie and other such VIPs who were gathered there; both Lucille and I were present, along with a bunch of people from the

Delphion branch families.

Once everyone was there, a certain ceremony was held—a transfer of the title “baron of Delphion.”

Although it was to protect his province, the current baron, Henry, had sided with the enemy and aided an assault on the Farzian army more than once. That couldn’t go unpunished.

That being said, we were in the middle of a war. Not only did we still have to fight the Llewynian and Salekhardian forces that had marched back to Trisphede, but once that was dealt with, we would be marching on the royal capital, too. Seeing as Delphion was the halfway point on that path, we had to preserve the balance of the province.

The chosen solution was to transfer the rank of baron from the current lord, Henry, to his younger brother, Ernest. Ernest had never sworn his allegiance to Llewynne, instead choosing to fight alongside the prince’s army. If he was instated as the new lord of the province, surely the Farzian troops would accept the soldiers from Delphion with open arms.

And so, the baron Henry took responsibility for siding with Llewynne by relinquishing his own title. As for what his future would hold after that?

“I must confess that I have no military savvy, Henry. I had planned to leave those matters to Emmeline, but I’d be honored if you would help me as an advisor,” had been Ernest’s proposition. He was thus granted a role as Emmeline’s aide.

Emmeline was designated commanding general of Delphion’s forces. Taking matters into her own hands like that was just about the most “Emmeline” thing I could imagine. Decked out in a gorgeous dress, she proudly accepted Reggie’s official appointment.

The former baron’s wife was in poor health, so she was still recuperating in the castle. Since Lucille had marriage to worry about down the line, she was adopted by Ernest in order to keep on living as the daughter of a baron.

It was truly comforting to see such a lenient judgment passed down on the baron’s family.



The Farzian army stayed in Delphion Castle for a while after that. The goal was to strengthen Delphion's defenses and, once the situation had stabilized, strike down the Salekhardian army. If we could force Salekhard to retreat, that would be a huge blow to Llewyrne as well.

Apparently, it was going to take us at least two weeks to get to that point.

The idea of "striking down" Salekhard made my heart ache all over again. Of course, there was nothing I could say on the matter, so I kept my mouth shut. Even Gina had steeled herself to fight against Isaac, and *she* had been engaged to him at one point.

Plus, according to what Gina had said, Isaac's plan was to escape Llewyrnian rule by losing to Farzia. While he would no doubt do what he could to hand Gina an opportunity to shine, he was equally likely to surrender before things got out of hand. I made up my mind to stop worrying about it.

Besides, Master Horace was being very kind to me as of late. Whenever I went to sleep, he'd stay by my pillow, stroking my hair as I drifted off. I didn't want to worry *him* either, so I had to do my best to get over it and keep my spirits up.

One day, amid all that, I was strolling the newly familiar halls of Delphion Castle.

"If I become a spellcaster, will you finally believe you need me?!" I heard Ada's cry ring out from somewhere nearby. Next came several different voices urging her to stop.

I rushed over as fast as I could, only to find Ada with her back to a pillar, gripping something in her hand. Surrounding her was Reggie's royal guard, looks of dismay on every one of their faces. Ada's eyes were fixed on Reggie, who Felix was hiding behind his back.

"Your chances of becoming a spellcaster are low. Most people lose their will and turn into rampaging defectives. If you do that and hurt someone as a result, I'll have no choice but to kill you," Reggie responded as he met Ada's gaze, not a scrap of mercy to be found in his words.

If she had expected him to gently coax her to stop, she was sorely mistaken;

he had dismissed the whole charade as pointless from the get-go. Rather than give up, however, Ada only backed herself further into a corner.

“But wouldn’t you rather have another spellcaster around? I can use this to test my aptitude, can’t I? If I don’t die... please, allow me to serve by your side.”

Ada seemed to think that if she became a spellcaster, Reggie would appoint her as a trusted aide. In which case, the thing she was holding had to be the sand of a contract stone. I had no idea where she’d gotten her hands on it, but I was overwhelmed by the strength of her feelings for Reggie.

Reggie gave a small sigh. “I’ve had just about enough. Here I’ve been meeting with you at your request, and yet you still haven’t provided us any worthwhile information. Frankly speaking, I’m starting to doubt whether you know anything more useful than what you gave us the other day.”

“Wha—you can’t mean that!”

“I’m sure you did glean a few more scraps of information in Trisphe. But a good deal of time has passed since then, hasn’t it? Llewyn’s circumstances have no doubt shifted since then, so it’s hard to say whether any of it would still be applicable. I don’t think I’ll bother dragging things out of you for much longer.” After bluntly informing Ada that her intel wasn’t worth anything to him, Reggie gave her a gentle smile. “What you told us the other day spared us the loss of a good deal of soldiers; I won’t deny that. You’ve already done your part. I promise to keep you with us until we make it back to your hometown, so there’s no need to push yourself to such lengths.”

“But... if I become a spellcaster...”

Ada looked frustrated—and more than that, unbearably sad.

*Oh no. I see what’s going on,* I thought to myself.

Ada knew how kind Reggie could be. And yet, since she wasn’t someone he could afford special treatment, she could sense that he was trying to gently push her away.

That sort of consideration wasn’t what Ada was looking for, though. She wanted Reggie all to herself. To a girl who desired nothing more or less than Reggie’s affections, a guarantee of her safety was meaningless. Hence why she

chased after him so desperately, throwing childish tantrums no matter how likely they were to put him off to her.

Watching her made my heart ache.

All I wanted was for Reggie and I to understand each other like family—to reach out to each other without asking for anything in return. Whenever he hugged me, all I felt was peace.

But Reggie was no relation of mine. I couldn't keep projecting my childish wishes onto him. It was upon that realization that I'd finally decided to get my act together... and yet it still made me so terribly lonely.

And so, in that moment, I couldn't take my eyes off Ada.

She popped the vial open. As soon as she'd removed the cork-like stopper, Felix stretched out a hand toward her, yelling, "Don't do anything rash!" Reggie didn't say anything, simply setting a hand on his sword as he watched the scene unfold.

A chill ran down my spine. Reggie had already chosen to kill Ada before she could do any damage. It was enough to make me fear he was going to cast *me* aside the same way—after all, I was no relation of his, either.

The thought was too much to bear. I placed both hands on the stone floor, and my magic coursed through the rock, all the way to the pillar behind Ada. The sides of the pillar stretched out like writhing tentacles, knocking the vial out of her hand just as she brought it to her lips.

I ran up to Ada, shoving Reggie's knights out of my way, and threw my arms around her. She was a little taller than me, so I couldn't fully wrap her up in the hug, but I held her as tight as I could.

"Wha...?" Ada blinked, utterly stunned, but didn't try to untangle herself from my embrace.

"Don't be so cruel to yourself. You've endured so much already! If you're having a hard time, why don't we just take it easy for a bit?"

Ada just stared down at me like a bewildered child. For the moment, she was still reeling from the shock of it all. If she stayed near Reggie, it wouldn't be long

before memories of his rejection came flooding back to her, which was bound to send her into another fit of despair.

“Let’s go get you something warm to drink.”

If I’d given her a choice in her current state of disarray, it might have sent her into a panic all over again. Instead of waiting for her response, I started carrying her away in my arms. She shuffled her feet along with mine, the same dazed look stuck on her face. Reggie’s knights cleared a path for us, watching us go in silence. After glancing my way to make sure I was okay, Reggie signaled Cain with his eyes.

Cain was the only knight to follow after us. When we happened upon one of the castle servants along the way, he asked her to bring some tea for us. Once that was done, he guided us to a suitable room for the occasion.

“Thank you, Sir Cain.”

“I’ll be waiting outside the door.”

“I appreciate it. Sorry for all the trouble.”

Cain tactfully stepped out of the room. Perhaps he was worried, seeing as he stuck close to the other side of the door. Words couldn’t express how grateful I was for all his help.

I sat us down on a loveseat in the room, my arms still wrapped around Ada. It was made of wood and no-frills, without so much as a cushion, so it wasn’t particularly comfortable.

Ada was still zoned out, looking like her mind had gone completely blank. Though I was the one who had dragged her all the way here, I didn’t have any brilliant ideas myself. I’d simply acted on impulse, and now I was stuck wondering what to do next. I wasn’t sure if I ought to let go of her or not, either. If she was her usual self, she probably would have pushed me away by now. Was it okay to just stay like this?

“Hey, do you mind me holding you like this?”

She didn’t respond.

Now I was really in a pickle. Was it that she *did* mind, but didn’t want to say

anything? Or was she fine with it, but didn't have the energy to answer? I thought about asking one more time, but Ada muttered something before I could.

"You don't have to do that." The thoughts swirling around in her head started to spill from her mouth. "That's what I expected him to say. I thought he was going to stop me." Her voice wavered on the last few words.

I realized she was just looking for someone to listen, so I gave a silent nod of my head.

"I thought that perhaps he cared enough to keep me from doing it. Or even if he didn't, that he wanted the information badly enough to put on a show of it." Ada drew her lips into a thin line.

Reggie would try to hold people back with his words, but he never *forced* anyone to stop what they were doing. That was the only reason I was allowed such free rein. No matter how much I struggled to get his blessing, I was always able to do whatever I set out to. Meanwhile, Ada was trying to measure his feelings for her by seeing whether or not he would intervene in her attempted self-harm.

If a bombshell like Ada kept incessantly declaring her love for him, any other man would have grown endeared to her at some point down the line. Perhaps that hypothetical man would have given her what she wanted.

Reggie was the wrong person to seek that from. He knew full well that there were some people you just couldn't expect compassion from, and that included your own blood relations. I had memories of my loving past-life family, so that lesson had stuck with him even harder than me. As a consequence, a simple appeal to sentiment would never be enough to sway him. If you wanted to get past that, you had to spend a great deal of time building a bond of trust with him, like Alan or Cain.

Unfortunately, Ada's circumstances made that impossible. As soon as we took back Trisphede, she was going to be left behind. Ada realized that herself, and perhaps that was why she'd thought of becoming a spellcaster like me; as a girl, it was the only way she could stick with the troops until the bitter end.

"His Highness would never stand in anyone's way. When I became a

spellcaster, he got mad at me after the fact, but he never once tried to stop me. He's never had much freedom of his own, so he doesn't want to keep anyone else from seeing their own decisions through—for better or for worse."

"He won't hold *anyone* back?" Ada asked.

I nodded, and sadness overtook her features. Ada always had such a confident look about her that whenever her expression darkened, her sorrow came through that much clearer. It was like how the wilting of a gorgeous rose was always more striking than that of a lone wildflower.

After some deliberation, she responded, "That makes no sense." She sounded more disapproving than anything, but I got the sense that she had started to come to terms with his desertion of her. She wasn't about to have any more sudden outbursts.

That servant chose just the right moment to show up with our tea. I unwrapped my arms from around Ada, and the two of us sat side by side, drinking in silence. Ada seemed to have calmed down considerably, content to sip at her tea without a word.

Eventually, Emmeline tracked us down.

"Oh, there you are! There's something I'd like you both to take part in. Could you come with me for a moment?"

"Where to?"

"My room."

I followed along at her insistence. Ada probably wasn't in the mood to chase Reggie down after all that, so she came with us, too.

"Shall I excuse myself?" Cain, who had been waiting outside the door, politely made to leave, but Emmeline held him back.

"On the contrary, it would be a big help if you could carry some luggage for me."

"Very well."

It seemed Cain had gone from bodyguard to packhorse. *But what in the world involves heavy luggage that she would need me and Ada for?*

“Are you doing a bit of organizing, Miss Emmeline?”

“Tomorrow is the day, you see.”

“For what?”

“Delphion’s traditional autumn festival.”

Autumn festivals were held in most regions of this world, even outside Farzia. It was the season with the largest crop yield, so festivals had gained popularity as a way to pray for a bountiful harvest. Plus, being an event that brought lots of people together, it was a good opportunity to mingle with the neighboring villages and perhaps even meet a special someone.

When I was little, I never had the chance to so much as hear about these festivals, and when I was living with the count, I wasn’t allowed outside much in case I thought of escaping. I’d never gotten to actually see one until I started living in Évrard.

It sounded like Delphion’s festival was a bit on the unique side, though. Everyone wore costumes.

“It’s based on a local legend about a man who took in a baby monster.”

Once upon a time, a certain villager had taken in a black, winged, baby monster—a darkwing cat. One of the kitten’s wings had been injured. By the time she had been fully nursed back to health, the monster had taken quite a liking to the villager, but she had grown too big to keep hidden away. He released the darkwing cat into a nearby wood.

A few years later, there was a huge outbreak of monsters in Delphion. Right when the villager was about to be attacked, he was saved by the very same darkwing cat, who had grown even bigger over the years. On one of the toes of her right forepaw, she was wearing the collar the villager had gifted her so long ago.

So went the story Emmeline told us, anyway. It had a lot in common with the Japanese legend of the grateful crane.

From then on, the entire village made it a custom to pay tribute to the monster who had protected their home. Long after the man who had adopted

her passed away, the darkwing cat had kept the village safe from harm.

The superstition took on the form of a festival held once a year, where people would dress up as monsters... or something like that. These days, it was a celebration where everyone would give out candy to people in costumes. When I heard the explanation, my first thought was that it sounded like a mix of an autumn festival and Halloween.

“Thankfully, we’ve received His Highness’ permission to hold the festival. It seems regulations weren’t tightened under Llewyne’s occupation, so the townspeople managed to make all the necessary preparations for the event. If we were to call it off now, I imagine they’d be quite disgruntled.”

We arrived at Emmeline’s room as she was telling us all of that. Lucille was already there waiting for us.

“I packed just about everything we’ll be needing inside, my dearest Emmeline.” Lucille pointed toward two wooden chests in the center of the room.

The boxes were nearly as long as I was tall. A commoner could’ve used one in place of a chair—or heck, if it was just a little bit longer, even in place of a bed.

“What’s inside?”

“Costumes.”

“Seriously?”

*Wait. Did she bring me and Ada here so we could dress up?!*

“Women always dress up as the darkwing cat for this festival,” Emmeline explained.

“These days, the guidelines have become a lot more flexible to allow for a greater variety of costumes,” Lucille added. “Anything goes as long as you wear cat ears on your head and wings on your back.”

“First off, we need to carry these chests to where all the other women are gathered.”

Emmeline asked us to bring them to a nearby reception hall. Cain grabbed one of the chests, and I formed a golem out of garden stones to carry the other.



Ada stared in horror as my golem flexed its fingers before hefting the box over its shoulder, and I let slip a laugh.

“Wha—I beg your pardon! I was just shocked that you’d waste your magic on such bizarre gestures!”

That was a rude way to put it, but given that her face was bright red and she looked two seconds from crying, she didn’t come across as very intimidating.

“You’re cute when you’re surprised,” I admitted.

Flustered, Ada’s eyes darted around the room until she finally dropped her gaze to the floor.

Anyway. “I could’ve used my magic to carry *both* of them, you know,” I said, glancing over my shoulder at Cain as he followed behind us.

“It isn’t that heavy. I might have considered your offer if we had to go up and down the stairs, but we’re just taking them right around the corner,” he responded, like there was nothing to it. Given how big and heavy the thing looked, that was a pretty impressive feat.

Lucille seemed to be in agreement. “You’re amazing, sir! Oh, I wish I could help, too!”

She felt guilty about being the only one without something to carry, apparently. Of course, since Cain had the luggage hefted all the way up over his shoulder, there was no way for Lucille to assist. The sight of her scurrying alongside Cain, desperately looking for something to do, was nothing short of adorable.

Being an expert at handling little kids, Cain had no problem humoring her. “Once you’ve grown a little bigger, you’re free to help out as much as you like. For now, just sit back and learn from your elders’ example.”

I wondered if he’d ever said something similar to his late brother.

It wasn’t long before we arrived at our destination. When we opened the door, we found a large group of young women inside, who I assumed were all castle staff. They were busy spreading out and sewing stretches of fabric, all in preparation for the festival. Judging by the folding screen that had been set up

in the middle of the room, they would be trying on their finished costumes here, too.

Cain set the chest down close to the door, then wandered off elsewhere. I handed Master Horace off to him before he left, ensuring the privacy of all the other girls in the room.

“Now, take your pick! Whatever we don’t end up using, we’ll lend to someone else!” Emmeline dragged the chest to the center of the room, opened the lid, and started taking out costumes.

There were cat ear headbands, some of them adorned with fancy lace, others decorated with glass jewels... and all of them pretty flashy. This really was like a glitzy, cats-only version of Halloween.

There was just one problem here. I had no desire to put on cat ears in front of a crowd of people.

*Well, this is awkward. How am I supposed to tell her no?*

“Thanks, but I think I’ll pass on the costumes.”

“The Delphion army was just at war with itself, remember? Having military personnel participate in the festival would be a good way to broadcast our reconciliation.” Emmeline shot me down without missing a beat.

“You see, I’m not a fan of drawing that much attention to myself.”

“You won’t dress up with us? But I was really looking forward to it.” Lucille stared at the floor with a crestfallen look on her face.

*Ouch. She’s breaking my heart here! Now what do I do?*

“You’re not going anywhere either, Miss Ada.” Emmeline got to her feet and held Ada back just as she was making to leave. “I fully intend to have *you* participate, too. You see, there’s another reason this festival is significant for single young ladies.”

“And what is that?”

“Men can give women a bracelet made of braided ribbon as a sign that he wishes to court her. It’s symbolic of the collar the villager gave to the darkwing cat.”

Come to think of it, Évrard's festival had a similar tradition.

"No thank you. I have no interest in flaunting myself to the general public."

"The more fish there are in the sea, the better a catch we can pick out for ourselves."

Ada had a hard time coming up with a counterargument for that one. *Wait, does that mean she has experience with "fishing"?*

"There's no point if those 'catches' are all small fry I have no room to eat. There's only *one* man I—"

"If a branch family girl aims too high, she'll just end up making herself miserable." Emmeline mercilessly cut down Ada's rebuttal.

"That's not true!"

"Isn't it? Once you're royalty, you'll hardly ever have the chance to practice your archery. I've heard that was something His Highness' aunt, Lady Évrard, struggled with."

"You think I care about that?"

Agreed. It was a little hard for me to sympathize with the "struggles" of being kept from archery practice. That said, I didn't want to get dragged into their argument, so I sidled up to Lucille and kept as far away from the pair as possible. Besides, all this talk of picking up men was completely uncharted territory for me. There was no good place for me to jump into the conversation, nor was I particularly interested.

"I'm not ready for all this adult talk yet."

"Aren't you better off listening? Here I thought you'd already come of age." Lucille went straight for the throat.

"Ngh..." I curled up in shame.

Meanwhile, Emmeline was still putting the pressure on Ada. "Perhaps 'miserable' was overstating it. Still, if you can't even catch a small fry, how do you expect to hook the big fish you're really after?"

"Hmm. You have a point."

*Oh dear. I think Emmeline is brainwashing poor Ada.*

At this rate, I really *was* about to get pulled into it. If there was nowhere to run, maybe I had to think of some other solution. And lo, just as the thought crossed my mind, I noticed a certain costume inside the chest.

“I... I want this one!” With trembling hands, I hastily pulled my mark out of the box and held it close to my chest.

“Really? You want *that* one?” Lucille asked, surprised. “That’s meant to be worn by children... or women already in a relationship.”

I definitely had my heart set on this one. Judging by Lucille’s reaction, though, if I just *said* that, there was a good chance Emmeline would raise an objection, confiscate it, and force me to wear something else.

So what was the best way to stop her from taking it away? To wear it, obviously.

I wasted no time pulling it on over my dress. The loose waistline left me plenty of extra wiggle room, so I had no issue wearing it over the rest of my clothes.

Here it was, my shining beacon of hope—a cat onesie with tiny wings on the back!

The onesies I recalled from my past life were basically just pajamas, so wearing one didn’t bother me in the least. Plus, it even had a hood that I could pull down over my eyes, hiding my face from view. It was just perfect.

“Nobody will be able to tell you’re the spellcaster in that,” said Lucille. “Besides, I’d call that more comical than cute—”

“I like that it lets me blend in! I don’t care about looking cute!”

Emmeline finally caught wind of our conversation. “What?! When did you put *that* on, Miss Kiara?! I was planning to have you wear this one—wait, no, *this* one! Look, it’s much cuter!” She slipped a cat ear headband onto Ada’s head, then pointed at a few dresses made out of soft, gray fur, doing her best to sell me on one of those.

*Look, those dresses show WAY too much skin for me to pull off.*

Now that I'd settled on an outfit, it was time to hightail it out of here. If I could just make it to tomorrow without seeing Emmeline or Lucille again, they would have no choice but to let me keep this costume!

"Too late! I refuse to wear anything but this now, so byeee!"

I sprinted out of the reception hall, aiming to have the last word.

"I don't think so, Miss Kiara!" Emmeline came chasing after me with just a few moments' delay. She was dragging Ada and Lucille with her, too.

"Waaah! Look, I'll join in the festival wearing this! Isn't that good enough?!"

"You're not going to catch anyone's eye like that! It defeats the whole purpose of showcasing our friendly relations!"

"Go ask someone else to do it! Girsch is way more of a girly girl than me! Now that's someone who could pull off the cute and fluffy look!"

"No! We don't have anything that would fit!" My brilliant idea was instantly shot down.

*Wait, going by that response, it'd be fine if we had something in the right size?!*

"Ada, go catch Kiara for me!" Emmeline ordered. "I'll exempt you from wearing a costume!"

Ada *had* been getting dragged along by the hand, but that was enough to give her a sudden surge in motivation and take off into a sprint.

*Eeep!*

As I glanced back over my shoulder, I pushed my legs as hard as they could possibly go, but the bottom half of the onesie was too short to let me run any faster. I was so panicked that I pitched forward as I rounded a corner, nearly falling flat on my face, but Ada caught me by the scruff of my neck just in the nick of time.

"Gweh!" came my strangled cry.

"Perish, so I can live!" came Ada's desperate shout.

"Good job, Miss Ada!" came Emmeline's delighted cheer.

Then, one new voice was added into the mix. “What are you girls doing?”

For a moment, my mind went completely blank. There was Reggie, standing right in front of me with his royal guard in tow.

Even Reggie was shocked by the absurd sight he’d stumbled upon; he was staring at us in wide-eyed astonishment. Groul’s jaw had nearly dropped to the floor. Worst of all, my hood had fallen down, so I had no way to hide my face from them.

Getting caught snatching me up had clearly sent Ada over her threshold for embarrassment; all the color had drained from her face. Even Emmeline was horrified to get caught in the act of apprehending the spellcaster, judging by the way she froze up.

“Pfft... Heheh... Ahahahaha!” What finally broke the silence was Reggie’s resounding burst of laughter.

To be fair, I did look pretty ridiculous right now. If I were in Reggie’s shoes, I’d be cracking up, too.

A startled look crossed Ada’s face as she watched Reggie shake with laughter.

“Is this for tomorrow’s festival?” Groul slowly inquired, almost like he was afraid to ask.

Emmeline nodded. “That’s right... although I’m trying to convince Lady Kiara to wear something a little cuter.”

“Haha, I’d say that one’s already plenty *cute*. It’s a good look on you, Kiara,” Reggie said, punctuating it with another fit of giggles.

*You’re just making fun of me, aren’t you?*

He walked right up to me, only to grab the hood from behind me and pull it down over my head. Then he started laughing again.

*What’s your problem?!*

“Well, enjoy the rest of your social hour.”

With a wave of his hand, Reggie walked off. He obviously had no interest in bailing me out of my predicament, the big jerk.

However, his parting remark had given me a flash of inspiration, and a grin slowly rose to my face. When I made eye contact with Groul, he looked scared out of his wits.

After that, I returned to the reception hall, went to Emmeline with my proposal, and managed to get her blessing.

For some reason, Ada kept staring at the cat onesie I was wearing.



The following day, I slipped into the costume I'd borrowed.

"Ugh... Talk about mortifying."

I was wearing the black, frilly dress that Emmeline had forced on me, along with a cat ear headband made out of some kind of fur, which I'd agreed to as a compromise. For the final touch, I was wearing a green ribbon around my neck like some kind of choker, a golden bell dangling from it. Before I'd realized what was happening, Emmeline had pushed *that* into my hands along with the cat ears.

Believe it or not, this was what I'd been left with *after* begging Emmeline to tone it down as much as possible. If I'd still had my past-life looks, I bet my head would have looked pasted on to this over-the-top ensemble.

It felt a lot like I was dressed in cosplay, which was extremely embarrassing for a first-timer. Of course, since I'd already given Emmeline my word, there was no backing out now. All I could do was keep telling myself over and over that *everyone* was going to be dressed like this out there.

*It'll be fine. I'm going to REALLY grab their attention with something else.*

Just as I was taking a few deep, calming breaths, Master Horace started making a fuss from underneath the blankets of my bed.

"Hey, little disciple! Let me out already!"

"Care to explain why you're so interested in seeing my costume, Master Horace?"

Before I'd started getting changed, he'd asked me, "So what are you going to be wearing? Mmheehee!"

“Why wouldn’t I want to see my girl’s proudest moment? Mweheheh!”

“Yeah, that laugh at the end really ruined it.”

*What strange ideas does he have in his head now?* I wondered as I pulled back the blankets and set him free.

“Wow. That’s a lot of black.”

“The design is based on a darkwing cat. Of course it’s going to be black.”

The monster of legend was a winged cat, its fur black enough that it could fly away and blend into the inky darkness of the night. If Emmeline had made me wear a replica of its wings on my back, I bet I would’ve fit right in on one of those singing competitions I used to see on TV. Thankfully, vetoing that had left me with a slightly more subdued ensemble.

*You know, that’s a good point. At least it’s not a garish color like white or red,* I thought, grasping for anything to convince myself it wasn’t that bad.

I tied my belt around my waist like always, hung Master Horace from it, and left the room.

“Sorry for the wait.”

Cain, who would be accompanying me around the festival, was waiting for me outside the door. He took a long look at my outfit, then reached out to touch the cat ears on my head.

“What are these made of?”

“Rabbit fur, according to Miss Emmeline.”

I’d found them incredibly fluffy and soft to the touch, and apparently, so did Cain. He prodded at them a couple times, then gave me a pat on the head.

“We’re supposed to meet up at the entrance, yes? Let’s go,” he prompted, and we took off down the corridor.

I was just glad he hadn’t said I looked weird. With that load off my mind, we made our way to the front entrance of the castle, where I was instantly swallowed up in a sea of black. Everywhere I looked, there was nothing and no one around me but girls in black cat ears.



There were children dressed like adorable kittens, wearing cat ears and black, puffy trousers with a tail coming out the back. Some of the women who had only just come of age were holding fans that unfolded into the shape of a cat. One girl was wearing glittering wings on her back made of some mystery material, while another was decked out in a dress with a plunging neckline, carrying a cat stuffed animal over her shoulder. Even the older women had on cat ears, a cat tail, and wings made of bird feathers at a minimum. Many had designed themselves pretty elaborate costumes, sewing twinkling bits of glass into their clothes or lace veils.

If blended into *this* crowd, nobody was even going to notice I was here.

In contrast to my relief, Cain had a dubious look on his face. “This is all... a lot.”

“Yeah! I can tell everyone worked really hard.”

Of course, Cain was a full head taller than everyone else in this crowd of women, making him easy to spot. Someone called out to him just as he and I were whispering to each other. “Hey, Wentworth, what are you doing over there?”

It was one of Alan’s knights, Chester. He was casting eager glances around the area, his cheeks flushed and rosy.

“In this festival, girls parade around in costumes,” Emmeline explained from beside him.

I could practically see his own personal vision of paradise popping up in his head. “You mean Delphion is going to be full of girls dressed like this?! We have to go out on the town, milord!” Chester turned to Alan next to him, began shaking him by the shoulders, and begged, “Please! I’ll do anything! I need this morale boost!”

“There’s the issue of security, though,” Alan contended with an iffy look, then took Chester and left.

Come to think of it, why had Reggie encouraged me to participate when I was a potential target for an abduction or assassination? He was still shut up inside the castle himself.

Giving a puzzled tilt of my head, I followed Emmeline's guidance and left the castle with the rest of the women.

It wasn't long before we came upon a row of stone pillars lining the road from the castle to the town. After receiving permission from Emmeline, I used one of them to make myself a ride shaped like a giant dog. It was about the same size as a horse, so hopefully it wasn't going to get in anyone's way.

Once I had crafted a seat on its back and climbed on, I was finally starting to get excited. I'd always wanted to ride on a giant dog when I was little, which was why I'd gone with this shape. This was going to be so much fun.

Emmeline looked up at me, a tiny sigh escaping her lips. "Well, I won't deny that it's eye-catching."

Apparently, she'd been hoping I'd walk around the town on my own two feet. It was too late now, though; we were on the march.

The city spread out before my eyes, mahogany brick surrounding me on all sides. Stalls had been set up in front of some of the houses, and the town was abuzz with the mingling of the parading women and the men looking on from the side of the road.

The men would say, "Please take this offering and protect our town," and hand the girls passing by a piece of candy, which the women would then take and place inside a handbasket.

As Emmeline led the pack, several men dressed like soldiers stepped forward to offer her a sweet. Right beside her was Ada, dressed in one heck of a onesie. It was a powered-up version of the costume I'd run away with the other day. The size of the wings on her back spoke to how much effort she'd put into it, plus she'd fixed them with reed screens embroidered with glittering beads. Even from a distance, she stood out from the rest of the crowd. She wasn't wearing the hood, either. There was a pair of cat ears on her head, and her hair was tied into its usual bun.

She must have spent all night working on it, judging by the faint circles under her eyes. Why had she suddenly decided to take this so seriously?

A single frostfox trotted along behind her. Gina was walking beside Emmeline,

and Reynard had tagged along for the trip.

He was busy sniffing at the legs of her onesie. Thankfully, Ada hadn't seemed to notice, but I thought I was going to have a heart attack just watching it.

For the record, Gina wasn't wearing so much as a pair of cat ears. *I'm so jealous! How did she get out of it?!*

Though there were a whole slew of things to occupy my attention, I was having a pretty enjoyable time watching the festival. I felt like a headwind I'd been faced with had just blown right past me. It was a refreshing feeling, yet somehow also a lonely one.

"Are you having fun?" Master Horace suddenly asked.

I bobbed my head in a nod. "I am. It feels very... peaceful?"

My own words fell strangely flat. Picking up on that, Cain prompted, "Is it *too* peaceful?"

After some thought, I nodded.

Cain's expression turned grim. "I imagine it's because this is so far removed from what you'd associate with war," he said, speculating on the source of my discomfort as he walked alongside my stone dog. "I felt the same way when I lost my mother and brother in the war. Once the war was over and my family had been laid to rest, there was quite a bit of merrymaking to celebrate our victory."

He gazed out at the festivities around him as he spoke. It sounded almost like a soliloquy.

"We had just beaten Llewyne, so of course everyone was elated. And for some people, perhaps those festivities were what let it sink in that they'd finally avenged their fallen friends and family. But at the time, the dissonance was too much for me to handle. I didn't know how to take it."

Without some kind of closure, it was hard to feel like the fight had truly come to an end; that was probably the real reason for those grand victory celebrations. Otherwise, everyone would get too caught up in their sorrow to move on with their lives.

However, for someone like me, who knew I would have to keep fighting after this, or someone like Cain, who had been left distraught and all alone in the world, a festival seemed like something out of an isolated world.

Perhaps that was why the loss of his family had left such a deep and lasting scar on Cain's heart.

"If it felt like everyone was just putting your feelings behind them, of course it would be even harder to forget your family," I murmured, putting my passing thoughts into words.

Cain didn't respond. But once he was done staring straight out ahead of him, he finally caught my gaze and, for just a few seconds, gave me a tiny smile.



Later on, Emmeline, Gina, and I all made it back to the castle without incident, baskets full of candy in hand. Ada had run off somewhere the moment we'd gotten back.

"What was that all about?" I asked Emmeline.

She frowned. "I lied to her and told her that His Highness would be taking part in the festival. That's what got her to come along willingly, but she found out the truth eventually, of course. I'm sure she's on her way to ambush the prince as we speak."

"Oh... Now I see."

I remembered I'd been shocked at how docile she'd been, quietly walking behind Emmeline. So *that* was the trick to it.

"The girl has nothing but His Highness on the brain. I was hoping that if she went outside and interacted with other people, perhaps it would broaden her horizons."

Emmeline heaved a sigh, deeming her plan a failure. I wasn't sure there was any helping Ada myself. I mean, Reggie had just completely dismissed her fake suicide attempt the other day, and she was still chasing after him. *It doesn't seem like a good idea to just leave her be, though*, I thought.

I encouraged Cain to get some rest, then headed back to my own room.

After setting Master Horace down and taking a short breather, I noticed there wasn't much water left in the pitcher in my room, so I went to get a refill. Today was the festival, after all, so the castle was short on manpower. It would be faster to do the job myself, and easier on the servants, too.

When I left my room and started walking down the corridor with a brass jug in hand, I saw someone come racing up the stairs.

It was Reggie. To witness him running around the castle was a rare sight; I was so surprised that I stopped dead in my tracks.

As soon as Reggie spotted me, he frantically pleaded, "Kiara, tell her I hid somewhere... No, no, I know you'll just crack like an egg. Come this way!"

"Excuse me?!"

Reggie grabbed me by the hand and took off running farther down the corridor.

*What's going on?* I wondered for a moment, but it wasn't long before the source of Reggie's dread had reached my ears, too.

"Where have you run off to, Your Grace?!"

"His Highness went outside—"

"I just saw him! There's no way he could have left the castle!"

It was Ada's voice. Someone had tried to trick her when she asked where Reggie went, but she'd seen through the lie in a heartbeat.

*Now* I understood why he was running.

Reggie dragged me all the way into a nearby room. "Stay here, Kiara, and don't tell her anything about me."

"What?!"

He lifted me up before I even had a chance to ask for context, placing me inside the empty closet of the unused guest room. With that, he closed the door on me, leaving me alone with nothing but a water pitcher in hand. I heard some rustling while I was still stunned, so I assumed Reggie had gone to hide himself somewhere, too.

Before long, I heard Ada shriek, followed by Master Horace laughing, “Mmheehee!”

“Excuse me! How dare you try to pull the wool over my eyes!”

“You’re an awfully rude one, little lady! Mmheehee!”

I heard the bang of a door slamming shut. She’d probably bolted from the room, chased out by his incessant cackling.

That hadn’t been enough to discourage her. She kept bursting into whichever rooms she stumbled upon, evidently in search of Reggie. Just as I was thinking that this was a lot like a game of hide-and-seek, I heard the sound of her entering the room Reggie had left me in.

“Where are you, Your Grace?! At least tell me what you think! Did it amuse you?!” she called out.

That question came as an even bigger surprise. *Wait, is she trying to get Reggie to laugh?!*

At last, I finally understood what Ada had been going for with that crazy costume of hers. She didn’t want him to say she looked cute; she was trying to get a chuckle out of him.

The moment I realized that, I felt a tiny pang in my chest. *Ada really does love Reggie, after all... Otherwise, she wouldn’t care about making him laugh.*

Right as that thought crossed my mind, the door to the closet flung open, and I blinked a few times as my eyes adjusted to the blinding light.

“Your Gra—what are *you* doing here, Miss Kiara?!” Ada stared down at me with a startled expression.

Meanwhile, seeing her dressed in that surreal costume and looming right over me had me scared stiff. *It’s terrifying to get chased around when you look like that, Ada!*

I was so flustered that I accidentally blurted out the truth. “Reg—err, His Highness told me to hide in this closet.”

“Why on earth would he do that?!” she screeched, only to make a frustrated *tsk*. “He’s going to run off while I’m distracted again! I must hurry!”

She absconded from the room, scurrying off elsewhere. Eventually, when the sounds of her hunt had faded away, Reggie stepped out from behind the window curtain. “Thanks for the help, Kiara.”

I finally pieced together why he’d dragged me to this room in the first place. “Did you just use me as bait?”

“I did. Sorry about that.” His apology didn’t come off as very sincere.

Most likely, Ada had discovered one of Reggie’s hiding places before he’d happened upon me. Having learned from that experience, she hadn’t stopped at just opening the doors to every room she could find and taking a peek inside; she’d noted that the closet was big enough for someone his size to hide in and made sure to check there, too.

On top of that, there had probably been another instance when she’d looked inside a room only to find someone Reggie had left there as bait, during which time he’d taken the chance to make a stealthy escape. Seeing as she’d fallen for the same trick once before, she’d made the incorrect assumption that Reggie had run off somewhere while I had her attention.

But Reggie was one step ahead of her; he’d actually been in the same room as me the whole time.

“In a stroke of bad luck, I ran into her as I was walking down the corridor. I managed to make my escape while she was distracted, but she simply wouldn’t give up.”

“But...”

I opened my mouth to tell him that this time, I was pretty sure she wasn’t just chasing him for the sake of chasing him. However, the words refused to come out, as if they’d been caught in the back of my throat. I was afraid to say it. When I tried to come up with an explanation as to why, I recalled a bit of wisdom I’d heard in my past life: *Don’t go meddling in other people’s love lives.*

Besides, Reggie was far better at reading people than I was; there was a good chance he had already figured that out for himself and still decided he wasn’t interested. In which case, it would just be a nuisance to have me say anything about it.

Whatever it was, it was between the two of them... or so I thought, but for some reason, the idea made my heart ache.

“What’s wrong, Kiara?” Reggie inquired, puzzled.

*Shoot. How do I play this off?*

“Did using you as a decoy bother you that much? Well then, I apologize for putting you in such a bad mood.”

“No, I didn’t really mind it!”

I knew that he’d just wanted me to cover for him so he could hide, and it wasn’t like it had caused me any real trouble. Since the two of us were friends, it was only natural for Reggie to casually call on my help like that.

“But something about it didn’t sit well with you, did it?” Reggie asked, peering into my face.

I couldn’t tell him the truth. All I had to say was, *Hey, I think Ada wants to make you laugh*, but I just couldn’t. I got the feeling I was doing something really mean here, and I detested myself for it.

I fell silent for a bit.

“Is it something you don’t want to say? Then you don’t have to,” Reggie finally said, smiling.

It was always such a relief when he would let me get away with things like that. What’s more, he even changed the topic for me. “That’s a cute costume you’re wearing, by the way. How was the festival?”

“Oh! Everything was really busy.”

“Did you have any fun? Lady Emmeline asked if she could bring you along for a change of pace. She mentioned that you’d seemed down as of late.”

“She did?”

Neither Alan nor Reggie had been allowed to go for security reasons, so I’d thought it strange that I was. I never would have guessed that it was all to provide me with a distraction. Was that why Emmeline had looked so disappointed when I said I was going to ride on a golem and observe everything



from up high? She must have been worried that it was going to deprive me of the festival experience.

Things might have worked out exactly as Emmeline planned, though. I hadn't thought about Isaac at all while I was parading around the town.

"Don't worry. I had a really good time."

"In that case, I'd like to reward you for participating in the festival. I heard you were riding your golem, so I'm willing to bet you didn't get any candy." Reggie took something out of the pocket of his jacket. "Hold out your hand, Kiara."

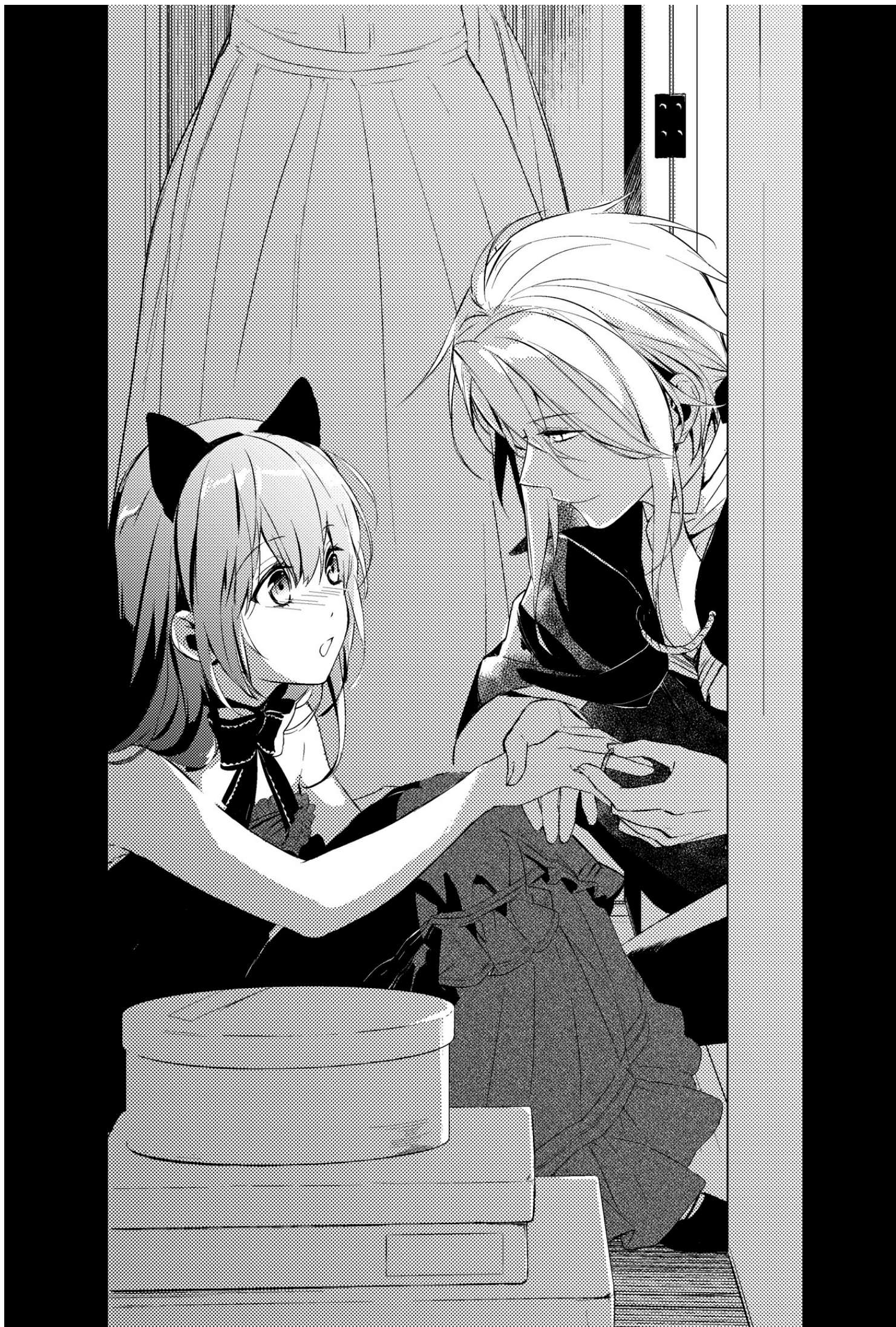
"Huh?"

Wondering what he might possibly give me, I held out my right palm. Reggie caught my fingers in his hand, slipping something on over the middle one.

"Huh? What?"

"One of the merchants from the castle town gave this to me the other day. I have no need of any accessories myself, but I didn't want the Delphion merchants to think I wasn't interested in doing business with them."

What Reggie had put on my middle finger was a ring with a tiny, pale blue gem.



“Whaaat?!”

*Hey, is that a ring? Why a ring?! It doesn't matter if it's the world of my past life or this one; rings aren't ever a gift you're supposed to give to a girl so casually!*

“You're overreacting, Kiara. You did us a service by taking part in the festival in place of me or Alan, so I wanted to give you something in return. A ring isn't going to be particularly cumbersome, and if you ever find yourself in a spot of trouble, you can easily sell it for funds.”

“But... a ring?”

If that was his reasoning, a necklace would have worked just as well. *No, wait, that one's a little suggestive, too!*

I had completely lost my cool, but Reggie didn't seem particularly bothered.

“According to that merchant, you can place a ring on someone's middle finger to serve as an amulet. So you can think of this as a lucky charm, if you'd like.”

A lucky charm? As soon as Reggie said it, I thought back to the festival earlier that day. If a man had feelings for a woman, it was a bracelet that he was supposed to give her. Did a ring signify something different, then? Besides, if he just told me I was allowed to sell it... then it probably didn't mean anything special, right?

I was relieved, yet at the same time, strangely disappointed.

“For now, why don't you come on out of there?” Reggie prompted.

Now that he mentioned it, I realized how weird it was to continue this conversation while hugging my knees in the closet. It was time to come out of there.

Just as I was getting to my feet, I remembered I was still holding the water jug and stopped to set it down on the floor. The closet was pretty small, though; when I bent down, I hit my hip against the backboard, sending me tumbling forward.

“Whoa!”

“Kiara?!”

Surprised, Reggie moved to catch me as I took a headfirst dive, but it happened so suddenly that he couldn’t support my weight. I fell to the floor, pushing Reggie down underneath me.

The only reason it hadn’t hurt was because Reggie had cushioned my fall. He was holding me close, our cheeks pressed up against one another.

“Sorry—”

I wanted to apologize. That was all.

But right when I turned my head to look at him, he did the same. I felt something soft touch the corner of my lips.

And it definitely wasn’t his cheek.

*That was the corner of his mouth, wasn’t it?*

The moment I realized our lips had touched, I put my hands on his chest and shoved myself away from him. This wasn’t even like the time we’d nearly kissed in Évrard; it was a complete accident. I had no idea what to do.

I wanted to make a break for it, but Reggie wrapped his arms around my shoulders to hold me back. Then, he adjusted his embrace so that my forehead was resting against his shoulder.

“I’m sorry. If you didn’t like it, you can just forget that it happened.”

When Reggie apologized, my inner turmoil began to subside. I knew it was really *my* fault. I should have waited to apologize until we’d disentangled ourselves.

“I’m sorry, too.”

Yet for some reason, his apology had also made me unbearably sad. There was something off about me today. At the rate things were going, I was afraid that I was going to end up saying something I shouldn’t.

“I’m, um... going to go back to my room. I’m sure Miss Ada’s gotten pretty far by now,” was all I said, hanging my head. I pushed myself away from Reggie—for real this time—and fled the scene.

“Kiara!”

I heard Reggie’s voice calling after me, but I dashed into my room and shut the door. Once I was inside, I pressed my back against the door and crouched down on the spot.

When I did, I stared down at the hand resting atop my knees—or, more specifically, the ring on my middle finger. If I took it off, maybe it would look like I was reading too far into it. It wouldn’t save me from the embarrassment.

After much debate, I left the ring on my finger, simply covering it up with my other hand.

## Interlude: The Scars of the Festival

In your typical love story, a girl declaring her resolve to die would be all it took to touch the heart of the man she loved. Ada had dreamed of living out that scenario.

*Yet why does he remain unswayed?* she lamented, biting down on her lip each time she reflected back on what had happened.

Ada had shown him that which gave birth to defective spellcasters, the powder of a contract stone, and made clear her intent to use it—and Reginald had simply laid a hand on his sword. The moment she saw him do that, Ada could have sworn everything went black.

Prince Reginald had turned his back on her. She'd gotten the message loud and clear, but she didn't know where she was supposed to go from there. All she could think to do was pretend she'd turned into a spellcaster so that he would keep her by his side.

All to give her the chance to assassinate him in battle, then turn herself to ash—to give her the chance to make him *hers* for all of eternity.

The one who had given her the idea was Queen Marianne, after learning of her feelings for the prince.

*I know how hard it is when circumstances keep you from the one you love.* When the words fell from the queen's red-painted lips, they had lit a fire under Ada.

"I couldn't have the man I wanted, either. Before I realized I needed to make him mine, Farzia robbed him of his life. You mustn't fail where I have. If you truly love him, you have to make sure no one can take him away from you. After all, if you don't take his life with your own hands, can you truly claim he's yours?"

The queen claimed to have lost the man she loved. Llewyrne and Farzia were constantly at war, so it wasn't surprising for something of the sort to have

happened. Worse still, Llewynne's defeat had led to her marrying the very king whose country had killed her lover.

After hearing that story, Ada finally understood why the queen wore nothing but Llewynian garments. Anyone could have guessed that it was symbolic of her will to never let Farzia taint her, but it seemed there had been a deeper reason for it all this time.

Knowing that the queen had been torn from the man she loved and forced to marry someone she hated, Ada had felt a pang of sympathy.

"Now that you've already been married, there are only two ways for you to be joined to the one you love. One is to rebuild this country alongside me and win the prince's heart. The other is to make him forever yours in death. It's a choice that was denied to me, so I don't want you to make the wrong one. Think it over and choose wisely."

Ever since the queen had said that to her, Ada had set her sights on the first option. She would woo him, protect him, and they would find happiness together.

Her powers as a spellcaster would no doubt lend themselves toward that goal. Neither the Llewynian nobility nor the new aristocracy of Farzia could afford to slight as valuable an asset as a spellcaster. So long as she had her magic, she would be held in high regard. If she wanted to take the prince as her husband, they would have no choice but to give her their blessing.

However, Ada hadn't anticipated that Reginald himself would be the one to reject her. When she had faked her suicide attempt, she had been so sure he would say, *It's alright. You don't have to do that. I'll protect you.*

Even Felix, that knight who always seemed to be glaring her down, had made an effort to stop her. The thought only saddened her further.

Right as she was falling into the depths of despair, the one to say the words she'd been waiting to hear... had been Kiara. *Don't be so cruel to yourself*, she'd said. *You've endured so much already.*

Exactly. Ada had weathered every trial thrown her way. When her betrothed had jilted her at the altar, her parents had lamented the disgrace she'd brought

upon them instead of comforting her. After fleeing in despair, she'd been forced into a marriage with a repugnant man. She'd even been turned into a spellcaster against her will.

The one she had met after enduring all those hardships had been Prince Reginald. All for the sake of making him hers, uninitiated though she was, she'd traveled all the way to the lines of battle and carried out her orders, claiming lives with each step she took.

And yet, the one who understood Ada best had been the very girl she'd despised and belittled. The shock of it had left her stunned.

She didn't have it in her to refuse the girl's tender embrace or kind words. It had been too easy to mindlessly accept the very things she'd craved for so long.

When she looked up, she'd seen that—unlike Prince Reginald, who was already busy talking to someone else—Felix had been watching her with an unusually relieved look on his face. Perhaps he was optimistic that Ada wouldn't be causing him any more trouble after this. Despite the twinge of irritation she'd felt at the thought, she'd simply let Kiara steer her away to another room, reluctant to struggle against the warmth of her arms.

Even after they'd taken a seat on the sofa, Kiara had kept her arms wrapped firmly around Ada. Considering the way she'd always treated the girl, Ada couldn't fathom why Kiara was being so nice to her. Had Ada's attitude not bothered her at all?

When they got to talking, not only did Kiara appear to bear no grudge, she even sympathized with Ada over Reginald's frosty attitude. Clearly she didn't realize that Ada had bad-mouthed her in front of countless strangers; it was the only possible explanation for why she would act that way.

Ada had been so engrossed in her thoughts that she missed her chance to thank Kiara for ushering her away from that fiasco. Before she could get around to it, Emmeline had shown up and forced her to participate in a strange masquerade.

Frankly, she hadn't been remotely in the mood for a festival. All she'd wanted was to weasel her way out of it.



That was when Kiara had taken off running in a completely outlandish costume. Rather than a fondness for strange onesies, it seemed the deciding factor had been that it allowed her to hide her face.

To make matters worse, Reginald had walked in on her right at the moment she'd chased Kiara down. When she saw him roaring with laughter, Ada felt like she'd seen Reginald's true self for the first time. It brought back memories of the male friends she used to chat with once upon a time.

She'd made a habit of avoiding them after she was married off to that nauseating viscount, hoping they wouldn't find out what had become of her; however, now that she'd been reminded of how much fun she used to have with them, she wanted a chance to talk with the prince the same way. If she could make him laugh the way Kiara had, she'd thought, perhaps he would open up to her a little bit more.

And yet, even after running all over the castle, she hadn't managed to track down the prince. The soldiers she'd run into along the way had all looked appalled, much to Ada's indignation. Kiara's master had given her a fright, Reginald had thrown Kiara in her path as a diversion, and still she'd refused to give up in her search.

When she dashed down the stairs and rounded the corner, she nearly bumped into someone.

"Whoa there!"

Just as she nearly tumbled backward from the impact, a familiar man caught her by the waist.

It was the sandy-haired Felix.

The moment she realized it was him, even though the whole point had been to make the prince laugh, getting caught in such a silly costume suddenly made her want to crawl into a hole and die. Judging by the grin that overtook his features, she was sure he was about to say, *Wow, you're really making a fool of yourself, aren't you?*

Once he had withdrawn his hand from her waist, however, what he actually said next defied her expectations. "Why don't you go around like that all the

time?”

“What?”

It was so far from what she'd expected to hear that Ada was left speechless. Why, he wasn't making fun of her at all!

“But... don't you find it bizarre?” she asked, too surprised to help herself.

Felix responded without missing a beat, “It has its own sort of charm. A bit unconventional, sure, but you're a lot more fun to look at like this than when you're storming around like a woman possessed.”

“Fun to look at” probably wasn't a compliment in this context, but he wasn't being critical, either. It was the first time anyone had reacted to her that way.

“You... You think so?”

“If you dress like *that* whenever you chase down His Highness, I'm sure everyone will just laugh and let it slide. Good day to you, milady.” With that, Felix took his leave. He didn't bother trying to detain her.

She was allowed to continue her hunt for the prince. Felix had just told her as much... but strangely enough, she no longer felt up to chasing him.

“I suppose I ought to get changed.”

Something told her there was no reason to stay dressed like this any longer. As she was heading back to her room to change clothes, Ada climbed the stairs and rounded the corner into the corridor.

Just then, she saw a door fly open, only for Kiara to rush out of the room. From there, the girl hurled herself straight into her own chambers.

Ada wondered what *that* could have been about, only to see Prince Reginald emerge from the same room moments later. Her eyes widened. That meant the two of them had been in the same room all this time.

While Ada watched on in shock, Reginald gently pressed a hand against the door to Kiara's room, hanging his head. “If I wait a little longer, will you finally realize? Or will you just pretend not to notice?” he murmured, then retreated down the stairs on the opposite end of the corridor.

“It can’t be,” Ada muttered. Long after Reginald had left, she remained rooted to the spot.

She didn’t want to believe it. Then again, the pair of them *had* always seemed awfully close. Prince Reginald never said much to Ada, yet whenever he was around Kiara, his expression always seemed to brighten.

“Plus, he laughed when it was *her*.”

When it was Ada wearing the costume, forget laughing, he had fled in a panic.

What’s more, when Ada saw Kiara the next day, she noticed she was wearing a ring with a light blue gemstone on the middle finger of her right hand. The pale hue matched the prince’s eyes perfectly.

Ada despised Kiara, the one and only person who had ever noticed how much pain she was in. Seeing her with that ring made Ada feel like her heart had been torn in two, and she wanted nothing more than to wring the girl by the neck and scream, *Why did you get everything I wanted after you ran away?! Why can’t I have anything after I’ve endured so much?!*

Once night had fallen, Ada pulled the candle atop her writing desk closer, scribbling down every pertinent detail on a sheet of paper as if it were a way to channel her heartache. It was around time for her to report back.

“Who gives a damn anymore?”

She would never win the prince’s heart. It hurt to watch so much evidence pile up right before her eyes, no matter how loath she was to admit it. No longer did she have it in her to dream of a happily ever after. In which case, there was nothing left to do but make sure no one else could have him.

Oh, how she *hated* Kiara.

And so, in tiny, cramped letters, she wrote all about the girl’s powers and Farzia’s chain of command. She even jotted down her predictions for what they would do upon their arrival at Trisphede.

Ada’s reconnaissance would be what brought the Farzian army down.

She giggled. “Die, all of you.”

However, that laughter gradually dissolved into weeping.

If she killed Reginald, Felix—that knight who had laughed and complimented her—would surely despise her for it. If he turned his sword against her, she would have no choice but to kill him.

And if she killed Kiara, no one would ever sympathize with her suffering again. Some part of her just wanted to be comforted once more. Some part of her just wanted another hug. Yet she could not rid herself of her hatred.

As she bit down on her lip, furiously wiping away the tears trailing down her cheeks, Ada nearly crumpled the letter in her hand.

## Chapter 4: The Incident's Unexpected Aftermath

Even back before I had been reincarnated, kissing had never been particularly relevant to my life. After all, I had been at the age where a pretty classmate locking lips with so-and-so would be enough to set off rumors throughout the entire school. Thus, I'd only ever seen it happen in manga, anime, and dramas.

*What did the heroine usually do in these situations, again?*

"I'm not sure remembering will do me any good here."

I recalled a whole lot of times when it had happened while the girl was unconscious. As for accidental kisses everyone was *awake* for? Those generally happened in situations where both parties already liked each other, and it usually ended in someone admitting their feelings. Neither of those applied to my situation.

"Ughhh..."

Ultimately, not even a full night's sleep had managed to get the kiss out of my head. I was feeling dizzy from all the worries running through my mind, and I just wanted to stop dwelling on it.

"It was just an accident! Besides, Reggie even apologized for it. Doesn't that mean I'm better off erasing it from my memory?"

*If you didn't like it, you can just forget that it happened.* How was I supposed to interpret that? Did it mean Reggie *hadn't* had a problem with it? Or did it mean that he hadn't meant for it to happen, so he preferred that I forget about it?

I groaned, feeling my brain start to overheat. Master Horace chortled from his place in my arms.

"Excuse me! Have you got something to say, Master Horace?"

"No, see, it feels like I'm getting tickled all o... oh... ACHOO!"

Master Horace let out a huge sneeze, clay doll though he was. Immediately

after, a gust of wind rose from his body.

“Huh?! What’s going on, Master Horace?!”

The breeze had been strong enough to blow my bangs upside down. Color me surprised.

“I couldn’t tell you, either—ACHOO!”

Master Horace stirred up yet another puff of wind, sending my hair flying up into the air. My hands shot up to my head to shove it back down, and I dropped him in the process.

“Wait, what?”

Master Horace suddenly stopped spouting air, landing with a *plunk* on the bed I’d been sitting on.

“There, it stopped. Good grief.”

With a little grunt, he pulled himself up into a sitting position. He didn’t manage it without his fair share of wobbling, however; it was hard for him to maneuver atop the soft bedding with those tiny limbs of his.

“I figured out what was causing it, at least.”

“What is it? My mana?”

“Mmheehee!”

I desperately wanted to know the answer, but Master Horace chose to keep mum about it, only laughing in response.

Just then, there came a rapping on the door. It was Gina, who would come by to get me each and every morning.

When I chirped out a response to her knock, Gina opened the door a crack to invite me to breakfast. “Let’s go grab something to eat, Kiara.”

“Coming!” I rose to my feet, having already changed out of my nightgown earlier.

It was then that Master Horace requested, “Hey, little disciple. Bring me with you.”

“Really? But I thought you hated watching the rest of us eat, since you can never join in.”

“I’m counting on a show to go with the meal today. Eeeheehee! Here I am, an old geezer doing overtime in life; let me have a little fun every now and then!”

I *did* owe him a lot, and as the one responsible for turning him into this strange cursed doll, I wanted to do whatever I could for him. Thus, despite having no clue what he was going on about, I agreed to take him with me.

Besides, he wouldn’t have to worry about the frostfoxes at the breakfast table; they’d gotten in the habit of eating with Girsch as of late. There were plenty of knights and soldiers who loved to sneak them scraps, apparently. Reynard was living up to his role as the male provider, bringing Lila and Sara with him and putting on his best puppy dog eyes to beg for a little extra food.

*They’d better be careful, though. I bet even monsters can get fat if they eat too much.*

While quietly fussing over the foxes’ unfortunate diets, I plucked Master Horace from the bed and headed to the cafeteria with Gina. Or, well... it was really more of a banquet hall than a cafeteria. The room was absolutely stunning, a gorgeous landscape painted over its white walls.

Under normal circumstances, this was where the baron’s family would sit down and eat their meals together, with plenty of servants on hand to take care of their every need. Sadly, this was wartime, so we didn’t have time for formal, seated meals. Everyone just filed in at around the same time, filled their stomachs with whatever food was carried in, and left.

As such, we weren’t actually guaranteed to see each other every day... yet today of all days, Reggie was already seated at the table.

I greeted him, doing my absolute best to act natural. “G-Good, uh... good... morning?”

*Shoot. That sounded so forced!*

“Good morning, Kiara,” Reggie responded smoothly, smiling his usual smile. This was so embarrassing. I was clearly the only one overthinking the whole incident.

“Eeeheehee!”

Just as Master Horace cackled, another gale swept around him.

“Whoa there, Master Horace!”

“What’s going on, Kiara?!” Gina cried out, alarmed.

Before I had time to think, I shoved Master Horace into her hands. The wind died down again.

“Master Horace!” I whined.

He had to have known this was going to happen. I glared daggers at him as he went back to his devious chuckling.

“Hahaha.” It wasn’t long before Reggie joined him in laughter.

“Kiara,” Gina prodded, “your bangs are all messed up.”

“What? Oh no!” I fussed with my hair, rushing to comb it back down.

“Maybe it’s not such a good idea for Kiara to be holding you right now. Let’s have you sit here, Sir Horace,” Gina kindly suggested, plopping him down in the empty seat next to hers.

“Aww, that’s no fun,” Master Horace griped, but he settled down in his seat without a fight.

*If he’s complaining, that means all those weird things were happening because I was holding him!*

Now that we had Gina safely sandwiched in between us, I started to think: there was one other time when Master Horace had released a gust of wind and flown away. It was when I’d been pumping my mana into him to get the stone propeller on his head turning.

So what *that* meant was that an excess of my mana was flowing into Master Horace, and he was blowing air as a result of it. Why air? That part probably had to do with what his own element used to be.

“I figured it out, Master Horace.”

“Oho?”



Of course, I couldn't announce the results of my assessment here and now. That would mean telling Reggie that I was still hung up on our kiss.

Meanwhile, Master Horace just scratched at his hip with a laugh. "So now you know. But will that be enough to keep it under control? You've got a long way to go, my little disciple. Heeheehee!"

"Ugh."

He was right. I still didn't know *why* my mana was flowing into him like that. It was clearly less than when I'd been experimenting, but I wasn't trying to pump any of it into him in the first place.

Gina, who had been quietly keeping an eye on me, prompted me to finish my meal. "C'mon, let's just eat, Kiara."

There was no point in wasting my time bantering with Master Horace. I rushed to clear my plate.

It was after I'd drunk my soup, finished off my salad, and gobbled down about half of my bread that I suddenly realized: I'd been so focused on talking with Master Horace and finishing my breakfast that I'd finally stopped obsessing over Reggie. He had yet to say anything else after having a laugh at my expense, nor did he look the slightest bit embarrassed. Maybe it really hadn't been a big deal for him.

In that case, I had to get over it, too. For now, I would just concentrate on eating.

After breakfast was over, Gina suddenly asked, "Want to go out to the garden?"

I had no reason to decline, and it was always nice to have an opportunity for some female bonding. Off I went to enjoy a post-meal chat with Gina.

Delphion Castle was a citadel surrounded by towering walls, but a manor that made for a better living space had been built right at its center. About half of the courtyard that bordered it on all four sides was made up of gardens. In one corner, there was a white gazebo, small enough that it couldn't house more than a handful of people at once. It didn't have any tables—only a single bench—but it was the perfect place to sit down and have a chat. What's more, it was

practically surrounded by thornbushes; even if someone wanted to eavesdrop, there was no way they'd be able to hear what we were saying so long as we kept our voices down.

Once we had taken a seat next to each other, Gina handed Master Horace back to me. "Here you go."

"Thanks."

"So, what happened with Prince Reginald?" Not a second after I'd thanked her, she dropped a bomb on me.

"What happened"? Right, what *had* happened? The question brought the kiss back to the forefront of my mind, and another huge gust of wind blew out of Master Horace.

He cackled. "Eeeheehee! Hey now, that tickles!"

A clay figurine blasting wind everywhere while scratching at his belly like an old geezer was a surreal sight, to say the least.

The image was nearly enough to put reality out of my mind, but Gina mercilessly brought me back to earth. "Kiara, I think you're losing control of your mana because you're flipping through too many emotions right now. Whenever mating season rolls around and my foxes start vying for the apple of their eye, they start sprinkling snow all over the place. I can't let them inside the house when they're like that, so I always have to lock them out for the whole week."

"Wow, so monsters can fall in love, too."

"Since you're a spellcaster, I figure it works the same way for you. If your emotions run too high, you lose control of your magic."

*I didn't expect her to compare me to a monster. Wait, aren't we talking about love here?!*

"I-It's not like that, honest! I was just taken by surprise!"

"By what?"

I couldn't very well keep quiet in the face of Gina's leading question. I murmured, "The corners of our mouths... touched by accident."

“My!” Gina’s hand slipped over her mouth, her eyes practically sparkling. “A kiss? You two really kissed?! If I’d known *this* was what was bothering you, I would’ve brought Girsch along!”

“Hah! Now *that’s* how you react to something like this. My disciple here is no fun at all! Instead of getting giddy like you, she’s been looking glum all day long.”

I’d already told Master Horace about what happened earlier. Now here he was, jumping to criticize me. *I’m allowed to make whatever face I want! This is really nerve-racking, Master Horace!*

“I mean, it was a total accident; you can’t really call that a kiss. That doesn’t make it any less awkward to show my face around him, though. Besides, it’s all my fault that it happened in the first place.”

“Hmm. So it’s awkward for you, huh? Now I see.” Gina nodded sagely. “How did His Highness react?”

That wasn’t enough to make her back off from her interrogation, apparently. After some hesitation, I decided that there was no point in hiding it after I’d already told her so much, so I muttered, “He apologized.”

For some reason, Gina made a face that screamed *Yikes*, slapping her hand against her forehead. “Why would he go and do that?”

“Now that’s what I call spineless. If it were me, I would’ve gobbled her up.”

“You’re a man who knows what he wants, after all. I thought His Highness was the same way underneath the surface, though. You think it’s because his ‘snack’ wasn’t ready for that yet? If he came on too strong and she ran off, he’d be in a worse position than he started.”

“Um... What are you talking about?”

I more or less understood what they were getting at, but part of me didn’t want to. Reggie had his own tastes and preferences, after all. If it had happened with someone he saw as a real woman, maybe things would have gone differently.

My gaze dropped lower and lower to the floor, until Gina finally answered,

“We’re talking about how nobody would want to hear ‘I’m sorry’ in that situation.”

“Exactly. The boy’s a milksop for apologizing.”

“What?” That surprised me. I hadn’t expected them to say that. “What else would he say?”

*Hold on, what do guys usually say that in that situation?!*

Gina chuckled and replied, “It wasn’t like he forced a kiss on you or anything, right? So if he apologizes, it just feels like a rejection.”

“You think so?”

Is *that* why it hadn’t sat right with me? Because it felt like he was rejecting me?

“Think carefully about what you *really* wanted him to say, Kiara. You’re free to imagine any scenario you want. And no matter what the answer is, don’t be afraid. My boy had a mean streak, so I kept trying to tell myself it wasn’t really like *that*... and before I knew it, it was too late. Don’t make the same mistake I did. Listen to your heart.” Gina patted me on the head. “Now, I’d feel bad if your hair got messed up each time you started thinking about it, so let me take Sir Horace off your hands.”

Gina plucked Master Horace out of my arms. “Come on, Sir Horace, it’s time for the animal petting hour.”

“Hey! What did I do to deserve this?!”

“It’s about time you learned how to deal with them. You’re not going to break apart just because my foxes licked your arm or sniffed at you a bit, you know.”

“I don’t want some damn mutt slobbering all over me!”

“Good thing they’re not dogs.”

As Master Horace’s protests and Gina’s quips faded into the distance, I sat there stewing.

“My heart?”

Most likely, Gina was alluding to romantic feelings. I really didn’t want to

believe this was “love,” though. When I thought about it in those terms, the first place my mind went to was Ada. If I became as obsessed with Reggie as Ada was, and he shot down my pleas the way he had back in Évrard...

Well, I’d probably be so terrified that I’d start clinging and apologizing like a girl possessed—just like how Ada wanted his love so badly that she kept hunting him down no matter how many times he rejected her or gave her the slip. Even now, while I still only considered him a guardian, the idea that he’d turned his back on me had been enough to make me run crying to Gina and Girsch.

I hated the idea of losing myself.

Plus, the more Ada chased him, the more Reggie went out of his way to avoid her. If it meant he was going to treat *me* like that, we were better off staying friends.

“I don’t want to make him hate me.”

And for that reason, I didn’t bother thinking about what I wanted to hear him say. If Reggie really wasn’t happy about the kiss, I didn’t mind if he wrote it off as an accident, and if he wanted me to erase it from my memory, I would do just that. Anything was fine by me, as long as he didn’t cut me off the way he had Ada.

Once I’d settled on how I felt about it, I started to feel sleepy.

“I guess I didn’t sleep much last night.”

It probably didn’t help that the sun had risen high above the gazebo by now, its warm rays of light beating down upon me.

I leaned back against the bench, letting my eyes drift closed.

When my hand stirred atop the seat just a fraction, perhaps I brushed it against a thorn branch that had grown all the way into the gazebo, as I felt a small prick on my finger.



When I opened my eyes, I saw a sparse grove of trees and a small pond off to the side.

“Oh... I’m in a forest?”

I was pretty sure I’d been inside a residence just moments ago. *Was that just a dream?*

After reaching back into my memory, I recalled coming out to the forest that extended west of the Farzian royal palace. The woods were contained within its walls, so be it an animal or a person, no one could get wander in without permission to come and go from the royal palace.

I’d been feeling drowsy earlier, and I must have actually drifted off at some point. For once, I’d been dreaming of a lucky sort of dilemma. I couldn’t remember what happened in it very clearly, but I was pretty sure I’d been somewhere else, laughing and chatting with a bunch of other people.

Here in reality, there wasn’t anyone I could talk to like that.

I stood up with a sigh, only to find my legs and back were sore after sitting and falling asleep in such an awkward position. *What am I, an old woman?* I thought as I did some stretches and waited for the pain to subside.

I wanted to take my time heading back. After all, the whole reason I was out here was that I’d made a break for it the moment I heard Lord Credias was coming to visit. There was no telling what he would do if he found me hanging around near the queen’s room. Hence why I’d run off into the woods; even if he knew where I was, he wouldn’t bother to come looking for me.

Given that his waistline was four times the size of mine, the viscount hated all forms of exercise. Thus, if I stayed somewhere that forced him to either get on horseback or stroll around for who-knows-how-long, he wouldn’t come near me.

Since I’d known I was somewhere safe, it seemed I’d let myself relax a little too much. All I’d meant to do was spread a blanket over the ground and lean back against a tree, but I’d fallen fast asleep.

Knowing that I still had a little bit of time left, I stared vacantly up at the sky.

“I wish I could fly.”

It would have made it so easy to escape somewhere the viscount couldn’t

touch me.

The queen may have allowed me to sneak out every now and then, but when it came down to it, she just wanted to use me, too. She would never let me run away. A veteran lady-in-waiting had warned me that a good deal of the soldiers guarding the gates were under the queen's patronage.

Besides, even if I did run away, how was I going to get by? I hardly knew anything of the outside world. I knew how money was used, but the only time I'd ever had any of my own was during my time in boarding school.

Surely I could get by so long as I had my magic. However, the only people who would hire a spellcaster were the nobility. A mage's services were far too expensive for the average commoner to afford. And if I were hired by an aristocrat, the truth would come to light sooner or later—that I was Lord Credias' wife.

The viscount had taken a liking to me because I vaguely resembled his late wife. For a time, he had even brought me along with him to banquets and such. That meant that the nobles who lived in the royal capital and the VIPs of various provinces would all remember my face.

Of course, none of that meant that Lord Credias took good care of me. On the contrary, he was clearly projecting a grudge against his "traitorous" wife onto me. He loved nothing more than making me scream and bringing me to tears.

All those months I'd been forced to spend at the viscount's estate had been no less harrowing than being trapped in an endlessly dark void. On top of all that, he'd made me into a spellcaster and ordered me to go work for the queen.

I was more than entitled to wish for him to keep his hands off of me, at least for as long as I was working in the palace.

Spending time away from him had only made my revulsion grow, it seemed. Just the sight of him made me nauseous, and the memories of what he'd done to me gave me nightmares. And yet, I wasn't even permitted a release through death; the queen's ladies-in-waiting had stopped me in the act too many times, and eventually, I'd given up on trying.

That was when it suddenly occurred to me: there was no one to stop me from

doing it now.

I'd given up on my suicide attempts as of late, and every time I ran off to avoid the viscount, I always returned to my room afterward. Perhaps because of that, there was never a lookout posted by my door anymore, the way there had been back in the beginning. It was a sign that the queen had let her guard down, assuming I'd abandoned hope. This was my chance.

I stood up and scurried toward the pond. I'd messed up a suicide by drowning once while I was living with Lord Credias, but I knew it would be easy enough to drown in a pond so long as it was deep enough. The water would weigh down my dress, keeping me from floating back up to the surface.

When I took a closer look, I found the pond was even deeper than I'd expected. A small river was flowing into it, so the water was fairly clear, too.

*Let's get this over with.*

I threw myself right into the pond. It was cold enough that I nearly screamed, but I kept a lid on it. I could already feel my clothes growing heavier, dragging me deeper and deeper into the water. I flapped my legs, just to test what happened, and found there was nothing to worry about—it didn't bring me any closer to the surface.

I was running out of air. The moment I wished my breathing would finally stop and put me out of my misery, somebody grabbed me by the arm. The mysterious stranger pulled me up out of the water, lifting my face above the surface of the pond.

As I coughed and wheezed, whoever it was patted my back. Surely he thought he was being kind, but all I felt was bitter. To add insult to injury, his tone was unimpressed as he remarked, "Why on earth would you jump into the pond like that? And you looked pretty pleased with yourself, at that."

For my part, if he'd noticed how "pleased" I looked, I would have preferred he hadn't stopped me. Now I was soaking wet and no closer to accomplishing my goal for it.

"You're right; that was exactly what I wanted. So I wish you hadn't interfered —"



When I turned around to tell him off, I was shocked to see the face of my unwanted savior. He wasn't much older than me, but he had gorgeous features... and I'd seen him somewhere before. That eye-catching silver hair of his told me right away that he carried the blood of the royal family in his veins. Nobody but relatives of the monarchy had that shade of hair. Considering his age, I could take a good guess as to who he was.

However, I didn't recall his face all that clearly, so I wasn't sure whether or not I ought to jump to conclusions. Perhaps there was someone among the nobility besides the king, his sister, and his son who had inherited those silver locks.

Really, I should have had plenty of opportunities to see the prince and king since coming to the royal palace, but with how busy I always was running from the viscount and living in fear of the queen, I'd never bothered remembering their faces.

No matter how much authority they held, now that I'd become a spellcaster, they could never release me from my bindings.

"Prince Reginald, I take it?" I asked, still unsure if my hunch was correct.

That seemed to amuse him. "It's rare to meet someone who doesn't recognize me. Just as you say, my name is Reginald," came his mild reply, a small smile playing on his lips.

Right then, I heard a voice echo from who-knows-where: *Whoops, my memories slipped through the cracks. Just forget you saw any of that.*

Meanwhile, the wind whipped against me as I stood around soaking wet, chilling me to the bone. Hoping to fight off the cold, I shivered and—



"Achoo!"

"See, this is why you shouldn't fall asleep outside. You're going to catch a cold."

"Look, I just fell into a pond—wait, what?"

My eyes fluttered open as someone shook me by the shoulders. I found

myself enclosed in the white pillars of the gazebo, Cain looking up at me from where he knelt by my side.

My head was a mess. I could have sworn it was Reggie who had just been standing right in front of me. Wasn't I somewhere else only seconds ago?

When I pinched my cheek, it all came flooding back to me: I'd been dreaming about what my life would've been if I'd never found out about my reincarnation.

Since Reggie had made an appearance, I assumed it had to have taken place at the royal palace. Thinking about it, Game-Kiara must have had plenty of chances to meet him, too.

Cain cast me a dubious look. "Are you still half asleep?"

"No, I'm awa— ACHOO!"

I sneezed again. My shoulders felt pretty chilly, so my body must have cooled off during my doze. And here I'd thought it was still pretty warm out for autumn.

"You always act like a child in the strangest of ways, Miss Kiara." Cain draped his cape around my shoulders. "If you were going to fall so deep into thought, you could have picked a better place to do it."

"Yes, well, I won't deny that I had some thinking to do." It wasn't something I felt comfortable talking to him about, so I chose to leave it at that.

"Was it about that ring?" Cain looked down at my hands, folded in front of his cape. That startled me. "Who gave that to you? His Highness?"

"I bought it my—"

"I don't believe you had any time to do so yesterday," Cain retorted.

I fell silent. He was exactly right. He had been with me the whole time, so of course he would have known that. Why did I think for even a second that I could fool him?

"Erm... Well, you know, people can give each other talismans like this as part of the festival. He recommended that I use it for emergency funds if I ever had to run off on my own."

“I don’t recall hearing a word about handing out rings as talismans.”

“Hold on. Really?”

Had Reggie tricked me? When I asked myself *why* he would bother doing that... *No, no, I can’t let myself think that.*

Meanwhile, Cain backed me further up against the wall. “If a man you’re not related to gives you an accessory, no matter what it is, it’s best to assume there are some feelings behind it.”

“Hrk...”

If it were anyone else, I would have told him I couldn’t accept it and taken it off right away. Seeing as it was the prince who had given it to me, however, I’d just assumed his sense of money was different from mine. Plus, he was my keeper; there was a chance he really *had* given it to me in case of emergency.

“I suppose I should have given you something, too. I was afraid it would just put more of a burden on you, so I decided against it.”

“Why would you give *me* anything? That sounds like a waste.”

I could tell this line of conversation wasn’t going anywhere good. By the time I realized that, however, Cain had already reached out to touch my right hand.

“I told you before that I would treat you like a sister. Isn’t it only natural for me to keep an eye on what gifts other men are giving you, then? Your brother should be allowed to give you anything he wants, too. Am I wrong?”

Cain was as straight-faced as ever, which just lent more weight to his words. He gave my hand a gentle squeeze; his palm was hard and callused from gripping his sword, reminding me how we had walked very different paths in life.

“I couldn’t ask you to do that for me, though. I mean, you’re not *really*—”

Cain cut me off just as I was about to turn him down. “You mustn’t say that I’m not really your brother. Unless your goal is to test me, that is.”

“Wha—oh.”

As if to demonstrate what would happen next, Cain planted a kiss on my

hand. I could feel a squeak rise in my throat at the quiet smack of his lips and the ticklish sensation gracing my fingers.

While I was busy panicking, Cain followed up by pressing his lips to my wrist. Watching him do it made me all the more sensitive; it tickled something fierce. And worse than that, it was just embarrassing. I averted my gaze.

Meanwhile, I recalled that Reggie had kissed my fingers in much the same way. It had been his way of cowing me into a promise that I wouldn't do anything reckless. Was this Cain's way of coercing me, too? Was he trying to tell me that if I wanted to keep him in check, I couldn't deny that he was my brother?

As I fell deep into thought, Cain chuckled. "You didn't tell me to stop."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. After all, it wasn't like it had bothered me *that* much.

I was just scared. Given how much more mature he was than me, I was worried I would get swept away before I knew what was happening. Plus, I got the feeling he wouldn't wait up for me the way Reggie always did.

"I didn't mind it, but I don't understand why you did it in the first place."

"Because if someone else steals your heart... I'm afraid you'll leave me behind."

*Is he feeling lonely, then?*

Although he'd just said he didn't want to be cast aside, Cain finally let go of my hand. *Does that mean he's calmed down now?* I wondered.

Assuming as much, I said to him, "There's no need to bother with that. I'm not going to leave you behind. You've always gone along with whatever I want to do; I don't know what I'd do without you, really. I wouldn't want you going anywhere."

Cain heaved a sigh. "Perhaps I need to be more direct."

In contrast to his discouraged tone, he grabbed me roughly by the arm and pulled me closer to him. Just as I gulped, he wrapped his arms around me in a firm embrace.

His arms were holding me almost tightly enough to hurt. I usually found the difference in our heights reassuring, but in that moment, it just fed into a fear that he was going to swallow me whole. It was enough to make me tremble.



“You don’t need to feel like you owe me anything. I do it all because I love you,” he murmured.

I could have sworn I’d stopped breathing.

*I love you.* Did I really hear that right? Had he really just declared his love for me?

I floundered, unsure of how to react.

Just as I’d mentioned to Gina and Girsch before, I was vaguely aware of Cain’s feelings for me. I knew he was interested. Still, I had never expected him to come out and say it like this.

I figured that his desire for revenge was stronger than anything else—that he wanted to tether the spellcaster to him to achieve his goal, and *that* was why he was putting the moves on me. And so, I had arrived at the conclusion that what he felt for me wasn’t really love.

“You still won’t believe me even after I’ve come out and said it? Well, I’d figured that you weren’t interested in facing the concept of romance head-on. That suits me fine,” Cain said. “If you can’t respond to my feelings, I want you to give me an order. Tell me not to leave your side. I want a promise that you’re going to stay with me. Please, be my sister for at least a little while longer.”

As I listened to Cain, the blush on my face drained away, leaving me white as a sheet. I could tell that Cain was projecting his dead family onto me.

At first, he’d just thought of me as another child to take care of, I was pretty sure. After that, when I was so intimidated by romance that he risked losing me altogether, he’d decided to be a brother figure to me instead. Having lost his own little brother, that must have rekindled his feelings for his dead family. The reason he was so scared of being left behind was because he’d wanted to be freed from those emotions for so long.

It was hard for me to say whether those feelings of his really were love. Regardless, I hated to see the person who had always supported and protected me suffering like this.

If I responded to his feelings, perhaps it would give him some peace. And yet,

I didn't have the courage to do so. Part of me still didn't want to wrap my head around the concept of romance—at the very least, not until we'd won the war and I could settle down into a peaceful life.

“Don't worry. Didn't we agree to fight together?”

For as long as we kept on fighting, Cain would find some relief in killing our enemies, yet he would constantly be reminded of those he had lost. I wasn't about to abandon him in a situation like that. I'd meant to convey as much in my response, but he didn't seem satisfied with that.

“It has to be an order, Miss Kiara. If I get anxious, there's no telling what I'll do,” he protested, resting his cheek against the top of my head. When I realized what he was doing, I had to stop myself from flailing in his arms.

*What kind of intimidation tactic is that?! Oh, alright already!*

“Fine! Unless you get seriously injured, stay by my side and keep on protecting me! You aren't allowed to go anywhere!”

That was good enough to get Cain to release me. There was a small smile on his face, but it looked strangely dull and lifeless. I only grew more concerned.

I truly hoped that, for at least as long as we walked the same path together, Cain could find some form of salvation.

As I made that wish, I thought back to my daydream. My memories of it were starting to fade, but I could still vividly recall the anguish I'd felt.

*Why did I have a dream like that?*

No matter how hard the war was on me, I was somewhere safe now. And yet, everything had felt so real, I almost had to wonder if *this* was actually the dream... and the thought of it terrified me.



Next thing Alan knew, Reggie was staring out the window. Curious as to what he was looking at, Alan came to his side... and immediately regretted it.

The second floor window didn't provide a clear view of everything. Plus, the roof of the gazebo hid nearly a third of the figures from view. What *was* clear, however, was that a certain man and woman were sitting in very close quarters.



“Uhh...”

What an awkward thing to witness. Not only did he recognize the duo, but one of them was someone he considered a friend, while the other was the man who was like a brother to him. Worst of all, Reggie was standing right there beside him.

Wentworth finally pulled away from Kiara, and once the pair had spent a bit more time talking, they left the gazebo. Just like always, Kiara took up the lead, with Wentworth trailing behind her.

All the while, Alan kept stealing glances at Reggie.

It was a well-known fact among those close to Reggie that the prince was exceptionally taken with Kiara. Given that he wasn't in the habit of wearing his heart on his sleeve, everyone had assumed he was being so open about it as a means of protecting Kiara, who had no one else to back her up, and keeping any bad company at bay. But by this point, even Alan could tell that the real reason was simple: Reggie was flat-out in love with Kiara.

Once Reggie was done watching over the pair, he stepped away from the window without comment.

“Hey,” Alan blurted out before he could stop himself, but he didn't know what to say next.

Reggie glanced back at him. “You needn't worry, Alan. Nothing will change the fact that Kiara is the spellcaster of the Farzian army.”

No matter who Kiara fell for, Reggie would keep her under his wing. That was how Alan had interpreted the comment, but something about it didn't sit well with him.

“Are you really alright with that, though?”

A conflicted look passed over Reggie's face, which turned into a rueful smile. “Oh, don't make that face, Alan. It's not so serious an issue.”

He did his best to look genuinely unconcerned, but Alan knew him better than that.

“But it still bothers you, doesn't it?”

Reggie's expression went blank. The next words out of his mouth, however, belied his true feelings. "If that's Kiara's choice, I'm fine with it."

## Chapter 5: The Fires of Farewell

A few days had passed since the end of the festival, and our reconnaissance unit had just returned from Trisphede. According to their report, Salekhard was in the process of tightening their rule over Trisphede Castle.

Since Salekhard was located up north, they'd had their sights set on the northern territories of Trisphede and Évrard for a while now; hence why Reggie had speculated that Salekhard was aiding Llewyrne's invasion in exchange for Trisphede.

Now that the Llewyrnians had retreated to Trisphede with their ally, they'd been communicating via boat with the province west of Delphion, Kilrea. Word had it that they were planning a two-pronged attack on Delphion from Trisphede and Kilrea. However, due to a kerfuffle currently unfolding at the royal capital, the Llewyrnians were in no immediate position to assemble in Delphion.

The explanation was a surprising one.

"There's going to be a coronation for the queen? But wasn't the kingdom of Llewyrne planning to annex Farzia?" Lord Azure's voice reverberated throughout a reception hall within Delphion Castle.

We were holding a meeting to plan around the results of our scouting mission. Reggie, the generals, and I were all there. Cain was present, given his role as my partner, and Reggie's royal guard was in attendance as well.

Standing one step away from the long meeting table was the knight who had led the scouting troop. He answered, "Apparently not. It seems that Her Majesty intends to become our new ruler. She's promised the Farzian nobles under her heel that she will let them retain possession of their provinces. The territories occupied by the Llewyrnian army will then be allocated to Llewyrnian nobles."

"Perhaps her plan is to win over the nobility of Farzia," Reggie speculated.

“But do you really think Llewyne would acknowledge Queen Marianne as the sovereign of Farzia? Up until now, they’ve annexed each and every one of their enemies, absorbing them into their own country,” Alan added.

Neither one of them looked terribly convinced.

“Does this mean the king of Llewyne and Queen Marianne had a falling out?” Lord Enister wondered aloud.

“It’s always possible they had planned to rule independently from the start,” said Jerome.

Something felt off about all this, and I furrowed my brow. If ruling Farzia had been the queen’s plan from the start, I figured she would have gone about it a different way—for example, assassinating Reggie, then taking out the king next. If the royal family was taken out of the picture in one fell swoop, instating the queen as a provisional ruler would be the natural flow of events. Was there any particular reason why she had to overrun the country with Llewynian soldiers instead?

Judging by his skepticism, Reggie was thinking the same thing.

“Due to the coronation ceremony, it should take some time for a sufficient number of soldiers to gather in Kilrea. We heard the Llewynians joking that if the attack on Delphion is put off too much longer, they may just have to spend the winter in Trisphede.” That ended the knight’s report.

After a stretch of silence, Lord Enister said, “If we’re going to make a move, now’s the time. They’ve got their guard down, *and* it ought to take a good long while for their reinforcements to show up. This is too good an opportunity to pass up.”

Everyone other than me nodded in wordless agreement.

“Did you learn anything of relevance from the Trisphedean girl?” Lord Azure asked.

Reggie responded, “She overheard a few comments of interest, but not as much as I’d hoped.”

“I see.” Perhaps Lord Azure had held high hopes for Ada’s intel; disappointed,

he cast his gaze downward.

“If your troops were to leave now, Your Highness, Delphion would likely find itself under attack by Salekhard, putting us right back where we started. It would be of great help to us if you could subjugate the northern province of Trisphede, at the very least. I do wish I could contribute more soldiers toward the effort, but we have Kilrea to worry about, too.”

It was only natural for Ernest, the new baron of Delphion, to be preoccupied with Kilrea. If we focused all our attention on Trisphede, the Llewynians were likely to invade from his other neighbor instead.

“I fully understand the need to defend your border, Baron. I *would*, however, like to know how exactly you plan to divvy up your men,” Reggie prompted.

Ernest answered straightaway. “Yes, sire. The plan is to seal off the Kilrean border with a force of two thousand men. Emmeline will command the march on Trisphede, bringing three thousand soldiers with her.”

“That leaves your defenses fairly thin,” Alan remarked, folding his arms. “We’re supposed to have reinforcements from allied provinces arriving soon. They number five thousand in total, and it should take them another week or so to get here. Perhaps it’s better to have those men head directly for the border.”

Reggie nodded. “Well then, it should take us three days to prepare for our departure. Our first stop will be a fort at the southern tip of Trisphede, Fort Zelan.”

With that, we had our plan of action. Everyone filed out of the reception hall to inform their respective troops.

I shuffled out of the room a bit later than everyone else, fretting to myself all the while. In the RPG I had played in my past life, Trisphede was one of the provinces that struggled against Llewynne until the bitter end. It was off the beaten path to the royal capital, which was presumably why the Llewynians had left it as one of their last conquests.

Thus, the upcoming battle in Trisphede would diverge completely from the events of the game—in other words, I had no knowledge of what was going to happen in the fight. I was getting nervous before we’d even hit the road.

Plus, Llewyne wasn't our only enemy. We would have to fight Salekhard, too.

*Is there any way to settle this without fighting Isaac?*

No matter how hard I thought about it, I couldn't come up with any clever ideas. Of course, I wasn't going to be able to fight *around* him, either. It would just confuse all the soldiers who weren't privy to our history, potentially leading to disastrous consequences.

"He's an enemy. He's an enemy!" I repeated over and over to myself like a mantra, biting down on my lip.



The Farzian army was used to long journeys by now, so it was only a short while before we were ready to head out. The only issue we ran into was that our shipment of food had been delayed, but we dealt with that by reaching out via post-horse or messenger bird to the various towns along our path through Delphion, adding to our supply when we spent the night.

"Now if we can kill the enemy and rob them of their provisions, we should be in good shape," remarked Reggie, terrifying in his sincerity.

At the moment, I was riding in a carriage with him. I had been instructed to use this method of transportation whenever we were on safe ground, since riding a horse all the time was bound to wear me out. Carriages bumped up and down a lot, too, but they were decked out with cushions and had plenty of space to lie down in, making them a much more comfortable alternative.

Reggie's lord-in-waiting, Colin, was also riding with us. He would periodically offer us sweets or tea, so I had the sinking feeling I was going to be a lot chubbier by the time we reached Trisphede.

Still, having Colin there made the trip a lot easier on my nerves. After that kiss and the spectacle of Master Horace turning into a portable fan, it had been a while since I'd managed to look Reggie in the eyes. I was feeling a lot better about everything now, but some of the embarrassment still lingered. It would have been pretty awkward to be alone with him.

The ring was still on my finger. Every now and then I got the sense that Reggie was staring at it, and I never knew what to do with myself when I did. Each time

it happened, I told myself *It's just your imagination* over and over until I finally calmed down.

Anyway, it was time to put that aside and focus on the war.

"I expect you'll act independently as per usual, but be careful not to stray too far from the troops. There's a good chance that viscount will make yet another appearance."

I nodded. If I threw caution to the wind and found myself too close to Lord Credias, I'd be down for the count.

"I have it on good authority that the viscount of Credias is traveling with the Llewynian army. I *was* hoping to assassinate him before he could make it to the battlefield, but it didn't pan out."

"You were planning to assassinate him?" I parroted back.

Reggie simply nodded, as if it were no big deal at all. "Yes. I attempted to have it taken care of while we were staying in Delphion Castle, but I was one step behind him. I'd wanted to put your mind at ease—so much for that."

I felt a little guilty, making him go to such lengths for my sake.

*Huh?*

I tilted my head to one side, baffled by a sudden sense of déjà vu. It was only vaguely, but I recalled him saying something similar to me once before.

And yet, this was the first time he'd mentioned anything about assassinating Lord Credias. I didn't even remember hearing about it from someone else.

That sort of thing kept happening a lot as of late. Was it because we'd made it all the way to the place where Kiara had shown up in the RPG? But even in the game, nobody had ever brought up assassinating Lord Credias for her sake. After all, aside from being an enemy spellcaster and the queen's lady-in-waiting, little was revealed about Game-Kiara's character.

Game-Alan saw her as nothing but a nemesis, so there was no way *he* would have said anything to that effect. Given that Game-Kiara worked in the royal palace, there was a chance Reggie had been acquainted with her, but he was dead before the start of the game.

Was I just imagining it?

Absorbed in my thoughts, I spent the entire ride to our next rest area in silence.



After a four-day march, the Farzian army arrived at the northern tip of Delphion. The plan was to set up camp about a half-day's horse ride from the border and spend the next few days there. Only after sending scouts to scour the land near the border and take stock of the situation would we go on to invade Trisphede.

Stopping there gave us an opportunity to join up with the soldiers summoned from all over Delphion, too. Looking dignified in a male knight uniform, Emmeline inspected and organized the gathering of men.

That said, rather than assigning a certain number of soldiers to certain posts, she just had more and more men join under her command. Thus, the soldiers from all the other territories were able to conduct themselves as normal.

Amid all that, Lord Azure's men seemed a little out of place. Their dedication to their morning and evening prayers always *had* differentiated them from the rest of the crowd, and their habit of bursting out into song didn't help matters, either. Still, today they felt even more insular than usual. The space near Lord Azure was always tightly guarded, his men forming a circle around a carriage packed with luggage.

Before long, the scouts returned with their report.

"We spotted a Llewynian unit on the border!"

I braced myself, fearing that our battle was already about to begin. However, the encounter ended in the blink of an eye.

There were only about 200 Llewynian soldiers, as it turned out. Lord Enister, the one tasked with wiping them out, managed to send them running with a mere 1,000 men. Reggie had hoped to obliterate the entire unit, but given that their numbers were in the hundreds, it was only natural that a few men would get away. He decided to let them go.



A Llewynian soldier we captured confessed that they were just a border patrol unit, and that there was no need to worry about a larger force waiting around close by. I was relieved to learn that we wouldn't be clashing with the Salekhardian army just yet.

Finally, we set foot inside Trisphede.

The following day, there was a bit of an incident. Now that we'd entered the province of Trisphede, I decided to scan the area for any spellcasters, just as a precaution. If I was careful to check every now and then, I would know ahead of time if Lord Credias was lying in wait somewhere to ambush us.

Given his body type, I doubted he'd be able to keep up with the more athletic soldiers, so we probably didn't *really* have to worry about that. Still, if it was all part of some master plan, there was a chance he might haul himself along through sheer willpower.

Cain was letting me ride on his horse, so I could take my time seeking out any magical presences. When I scanned the area...

"Huh?"

I sensed a spellcaster.

*But why do I sense one behind me?*

I glanced back behind us, twisting my body so I could see around Cain.

"Is something the matter?"

"Uh... I was scanning for any spellcasters in the area, and I think I sensed something behind us."

It was pretty close, too. *What's going on here?*

Cain relayed my report to Chester and Alan, who were hanging around nearby, and I found myself surrounded with knights in a matter of seconds.

"Let's fall back so you can start searching. Try not to draw too much attention to yourself," Alan instructed.

I gulped and nodded. Pretending that I was headed to the rear to handle some business with Alan and his knights, we doubled back along the edge of the

high road, taking our sweet time about it. We had to go slow if I wanted to pin down the source. It would be one thing if they were shadowing us, but in the event that this mystery spellcaster had slipped into our troops, rushing was just going to make it harder to find them.

I closed my eyes, seeking out the source of this powerful magical energy.

*Just a little farther... It's getting close now!*

Eventually, the direction it was coming from shifted. That proved that this mystery person had just passed close by. The moment I knew I'd come right up beside them, I opened my eyes and gave Cain the signal.

"Wait, what?"

I was staring straight into the lines of Lord Azure's troops. They were marching steadily along, a carriage full of luggage at the heart of the procession. My finger was pointing right at said carriage.

I checked one more time, which only confirmed that I had the right source.

Could someone as devoted to Reggie as Lord Azure really be sheltering an enemy? *There's no way*, I thought, but Alan and his knights had already sprung into action.

"Allow us to inspect that carriage of yours, Lord Azure," said Alan. His knights flanked the carriage, fixing the marquis with stern gazes.

Lord Azure gasped, taken aback by Alan's declaration, but he ultimately consented. "Very well. I do apologize... It was an act of impulse. I just felt so sorry for the poor thing."

Alan gave a puzzled tilt of his head. Judging by that response, it was true that Lord Azure had snuck something onto that carriage... but whatever it was, he clearly didn't seem to believe it was anything dangerous.

Before Alan's men could begin their search, the marquis' knights barked an order. Moments later, someone emerged from under a burlap sheet inside the carriage.

"Miss Ada?!"

She hung her head, forlorn, and replied, "My apologies. I wanted to return to

my hometown as soon as I possibly could.”

Evidently, the source of the magic had been the contract stone that still hung around Ada’s neck.

I explained the situation to Alan and Cain in hushed tones. “It’s okay. It looks like I was just picking up on Ada’s pendant.”

“Her pendant?”

“It’s a contract stone. It gives off the same magical vibes as a spellcaster, so I’m pretty sure that’s what led me to her.”

Next, we heard Lord Azure’s account. Desperate to return to her hometown, Ada had pleaded with Reggie and his knights to bring her with them, only to be rebuffed. It was when she was praying for even *one* member of her family to stay safe and sound, if nothing else, that Lord Azure had stumbled upon her. After hearing her out, he had taken pity on the girl and allowed her to ride in his carriage.

While we were listening to his rundown of the situation, I could have sworn I felt someone’s eyes on me. Curious, I glanced around, but no one appeared to be looking my way; perhaps it had been my imagination. Even Ada’s eyes were trained on the ground.

As I was puzzling that out, Alan came to a decision on what to do with Ada. “Now that we’ve brought you all this way, we can’t very well send you back to the castle. If you’ve overheard any of Lord Azure’s conversations, surely you’ve picked up on the path of our march and other such bits of information.” Once he’d prefaced his judgment with that, he leveled Lord Azure with a glare. “We *are* set to pass by her hometown. You’re to toss her out once we get there. If we drag her along for the entirety of our march, she’ll just get in the way. You... Ada, was it? I assume you accounted for this possibility.”

“But, Lord Alan—” Lord Azure stepped in to intervene, but Ada cut him off before he could.

“Yes, that’s fine by me. I was already planning to look for my parents’ bodies to give them a proper burial, and I certainly couldn’t detain the prince’s troops in enemy territory over a personal affair. Now that I know I’ll never win His

Highness' heart, it no longer matters if an enemy soldier were to spot me and kill me," she said, claiming she had come here prepared to die.

Alan turned to Lord Azure, the look on his face as dour as ever. "See? She knew what she was getting into. Do as I've told you, Marquis."

"Very well," Lord Azure reluctantly agreed. Judging by the pitying look he shot Ada, he felt awful for her.

I understood the feeling. I hated the idea of throwing a lone girl into enemy territory.

Perhaps Cain was worried that my sympathy was going to drive me to say something I shouldn't, seeing as he guided me away from the scene. "Let's go, Miss Kiara."

I nodded, and Cain's horse resumed its trot.

When I took one last look back, I saw Ada still staring at the ground, a despondent smile on her face.

Night fell. Given the enormous number of soldiers we had with us, we would be camping out once again.

Dinner was a lot of fun. Emmeline, Gina, Girsch, and I all gathered around the bonfire to eat. When the topic of Ada came up, everyone wore inscrutable expressions.

"In other words, she abandoned all hope after her heart was broken?" Emmeline theorized—bluntly enough that Ada surely would have fainted if she were around to hear it.

She was seated atop the stone bench I'd made, the light of the bonfire casting an orange glow over her pale skin and ashen hair, which was tied back behind her.

"I suppose it's no surprise, when you think about how obsessed she was with His Highness," she went on. "All that passion, and there wasn't a thing she could do to sway him. Not even bringing her love for her family into the equation was enough to convince him to take her along to Trisphede. That must have been when she abandoned all hope... or at least that's my best guess."

"I thought the same thing. She never *did* seem like she had eyes for anything but him," Gina chimed in.

Girsch placed a hand to one cheek, humming thoughtfully.

"Do you see it differently, Girsch?" I asked.

The mercenary responded with a bemused look. "Something about it just doesn't sit right with me."

"What do you mean?"

"With how caught up in her delusions she is, she seemed more like the type to jump straight to her death after a rejection. One of His Highness' knights, Sir Felix, even came to me about that. He asked me to talk her down if she ever seemed at risk of throwing herself off the castle walls."

"Sir Felix did that?"

I had no idea those two had had that sort of conversation behind the scenes. Felix really had his hands full looking out for her. Despite seeming like a meek guy at a first glance, he was always pretty strict with Ada; lately, I'd been taking extra care to make sure I never did anything to warrant the same treatment.

"That's just the way it goes. Once a girl *her* age finds something to fixate on, she's never going to budge," Master Horace piped up.

"My, Sir Horace! You understand the female mind so well," Girsch praised.

He chortled and replied, "Of course I do! Why, in my younger years, I always had a girl hanging off each arm, just begging for me to pick her over the other!"

"Wait, you're saying you were a ladykiller, Master Horace? Are you sure you didn't just imagine it?" I asked, sincerely curious.

Master Horace fell dead silent.

"Kiara! You were supposed to just run with it!" Gina stressed, pity in her eyes.

Before I could respond, *Oops, I didn't realize it was a joke we were all in on*, Emmeline cut off that line of conversation. "Then, Girsch... in your opinion, Miss Ada seems like someone who would choose to die after losing out on love?"

The conversation pressed onward, leaving Master Horace to stew in his

silence.

“I thought that there was a decent chance of it, that’s all. Besides, what she’s doing *now* is just another form of suicide, in a sense.”

“That’s a good point,” Gina remarked. “Trying to go back to her hometown when it’s still in enemy hands? I’d never do something like that.”

“Well, of course. When *you* strike out in love, you’re the type to go, ‘Fine, I don’t need men!’ and set out to support yourself, only to spend the whole time thinking about the very man who left you heartbroken,” Girsch replied, wearing a mischievous grin.

Gina puffed out her cheeks just like a little girl would. It made her look oddly cute, considering she was a grown woman. “Don’t say that!”

“Please, it was just a hypothetical. I never said it was *true*.”

“Grr! That know-it-all attitude of yours drives me nuts, you know that?!”

“My, my. Are you entering your rebellious phase, Gina dear?”

Thus, Gina spent the rest of our dinner as the victim of Girsch’s teasing.



The next day, the Farzian troops marched even farther north. In Ada’s homeland of Trisphede, her family managed a fort in a region called Liadna. It had been built a fairly long time ago, but had supposedly only been used a few times in the past. Since Trisphede’s adversary was typically Salekhard, it was the forts near the northern border that saw the most use.

Just north of the fort was the town of Liadna. The branch family to which Ada belonged resided in a manor there.

The Évrard army headed for Fort Liadna first. We knew there were about 500 Salekhardian and Llewynian soldiers stationed there.

That bit of intel had been spilled by a Llewynian soldier we’d captured on the border. The king of Salekhard, Isaac, had been staying there right up until the unit had headed out on patrol. It was then that he had left for Trisphede Castle, apparently.

Of course, there was always a chance that Llewynian had fed us false information. Reggie had us exercise great caution as we approached the fort.

Once we'd made it close enough to get a good look, we found that the fort was in rough shape. When Salekhard attacked Trisphede, Llewne's defective spellcasters had destroyed the wall. The Llewynians had repaired it later on so they could use the fort for themselves, but they had only managed to restore it to about half of its original height.

Evidently, it hadn't been earth spellcasters that tore it down. Fire spellcasters, perhaps, if the traces of explosions along the walls were any indication.

That was when I realized that something seemed off about all this. Was it even possible to wield the sheer number of defective spellcasters it would take to do this much damage?

Bemused as I was, I confirmed that there were no spellcasters in the vicinity. I already knew Ada was here, so I focused my efforts elsewhere. I didn't pick up on anything else, so I figured we were in the clear.

At Reggie's request, I formed a golem at the head of the troops lined up outside Fort Liadna. All we cared about this time was capturing it as quickly as possible, so I had my golem break into the fort by kicking down the half-repaired sections of the wall.

Next, to aid the assault of Jerome's Limerick troops, I started picking off the dozens of archers who were shooting their arrows from atop the fort and moving them down to the ground. Once I was done with that, I decided to build us an alternate entranceway. Having just one path inside wasn't going to cut it. With that in mind, I was just about to kick open another hole in the wall.

That was when one of Jerome's men, who had charged into the fort ahead of us, came rushing back out.

"The Llewynians are fleeing from the rear!"

It sounded like the Llewynians had opted to abandon the fort.

Alan clicked his tongue in frustration. "*I thought* there were too few archers... So that's what they were planning. Relay a message to His Highness! Tell him to stamp out the soldiers who cut around to the back to escape!"

The runner who had been standing next to Alan dashed off.

It wasn't long before the troops led by Reggie and Lord Azure went on the move. I hung back with Alan and Jerome. After all, if my golem was stomping around all over the place, there was a chance I might accidentally crush some of the soldiers on the march.

Once we'd confirmed that Jerome and all of his Limerick soldiers had made it back, we went after Reggie. However, not long after they'd cut around to the back of the fort, Reggie's men had started marching even farther north.

"Did the Llewynians get away?" Alan wondered, skeptical.

We caught up to a squad of Delphion soldiers at the rear of the vanguard troops. Emmeline galloped over as soon as she spotted me.

"Are you alright, Miss Kiara?" she asked.

"What's going on? Did the soldiers who fled from the back give you the slip?" Alan cut in.

"The Llewynians had begun to flee before we even got here. After taking out a unit in the rear, we learned there was an even greater number of enemies down the path. Their vanguard was headed for the town, so His Highness believes that's where the main body is hiding. He wants to go bring them down."

"So you think Llewynian troops are hiding in town?"

"It's possible. That said, Liadna isn't very big, so there couldn't be a particularly large number of soldiers lurking there. Lord Azure proposed that this was a necessary measure to ensure the safety of the surrounding area, and His Highness agreed."

What I was most concerned about was the town itself. "The citizens of Liadna haven't been evacuated, have they? Since it's under Salekhardian rule, it *should* be considered an ally of Llewyrne. Hopefully that means their soldiers won't do anything drastic, but still."

Occupied territory or not, I was worried they might commit violence against the townspeople simply for being Farzians.



“There’s no telling what might happen. The Llewynians could always invent some way to justify slaughter. Having the Farzian army nearby gives them the perfect excuse; they can just claim that the citizens took the opportunity to rise up and attack them from behind,” Cain said, which only further fueled my concerns.

“I’m sure Reggie accounted for that. I bet his plan is to put pressure on them by closing in, and then see if that takes care of the problem on its own,” Alan hypothesized.

“You’re probably right,” Cain agreed.

In that case, there wasn’t going to be much we could do for a while.

Eventually, Reggie halted his march right where Liadna came into view down the road. As soon as we saw that, Alan and I started heading over, planning to report to him on Liadna.

But then, all of a sudden, his troops once again began to advance north.

“Why?!” Alan exclaimed.

He detained one of the cavalymen in the vanguard and asked what was going on. The man explained that a townspeople had come to the Farzian troops requesting their aid. Now that someone had called on their help, they had no choice but to head into the town.

Even so, Reggie had remained cautious.

“If it was only a hundred men that escaped into the town, there’s no reason to send all our troops in. Let’s split up into three squads: one that will head into the town, one that will stand by outside, and one that will guard the surrounding area,” he’d said. After that, he had divided his soldiers up, sending a small enough number of men into the town to let them navigate it easily.

Before long, a message made its way back to Alan. I was instructed to wait outside the town with the Delphion and Évrard armies. I listened to my orders, gazing out at the Delphion soldiers standing guard around a food transport carriage while I searched for any magical presences nearby.

Suddenly, someone jumped out from one of the wagons.

“Miss Ada?!”

There was no one among the Farzian army who wore a dress other than me and Ada, so it had to be her. She was making a beeline for the town.

I nearly ran after her, but Cain stopped me from dismounting his horse. “It’s too dangerous, Miss Kiara. There’s no telling where the Llewynian soldiers could be hiding in the town. If you rush in alone only to come face-to-face with an enemy, what are you going to do?”

“Alright.”

Cain was right. I was vulnerable to surprise attacks, and if someone cut me down with a sword, I’d be dead in an instant. Jumping headfirst into a town where enemies could be hiding anywhere was practically suicide. Thus, I simply nodded.

Should I have gone after Ada there or not? Even after everything was all said and done, I was never sure of the answer.



I heard about what happened on Reggie’s end after the fact.

Reggie, his royal guard, and about 500 of Lord Azure’s soldiers had marched into the town of Liadna, the same place I’d just seen Ada make a run for. Given how narrow the roads were, rushing in with any more men than that would have made it harder for them to get around. Thus, the Évrard army—which had been effectively operating as Reggie’s troops—and the remainder of Lord Azure’s soldiers joined up with Alan instead.

Soon after Reggie and Lord Azure set foot inside the town, a fire broke out. When they looked up, they could see smoke billowing overhead in several spots. Every now and then it would drift in their direction, clouding their vision.

“Leave it to me! I’ll brush away any sparks that dare fly toward His Highness!” Lord Azure shouted as he sprinted toward the heart of the town, leading the cavalry.

Reggie sent Lord Azure’s foot soldiers ahead, but something about the scenario didn’t sit right with him. “Say, Felix... Don’t you think this happened a

little too quickly?”

“How fast the fire spread, you mean? Given how dry the air is, I don’t believe it’s anything implausible.”

“No, it’s covered far too much ground already,” another knight interjected. “Did the enemy have that big a lead on us?”

Suddenly, a small piece of firewood came plummeting down from above. Vigilant and alert, Reggie and his knights all glanced up in unison.

What they saw was a bald old man in the second floor window of a building facing the road. He sluggishly turned toward Reggie and his men, then pressed his hands together and bowed his head—a gesture of apology.

Reggie wasted no time before he began shouting orders. “We’re retreating! Someone notify the marquis!”

“Your Grace?”

Some men stood there bewildered for a moment, while others galloped off toward Lord Azure without delay. Soon enough, however, everyone was complying with Reggie’s orders, none of the men asking for so much as an explanation.

As he turned his horse around, Reggie announced, “The fire spread so quickly because the townspeople started it themselves! We need to call back the marquis before—”

“YOUR GRAAACE!” Lord Azure roared from afar, his voice no doubt loud enough to carry across a distant mountain. It wasn’t long before the man himself made his way back to Reggie, the rest of the cavalry in tow. “I heard we were to retreat immediately! Did something happen?!”

Reggie shared his theory with the marquis. “It looks like Llewyne lured us into town. They knew that if a townspeople called on our help, we would send in someone of a general’s rank. There must be even more soldiers lying in wait, ready to take us out.”

After that, it was a race to escape Liadna. While he had plenty of soldiers waiting outside the gates, Reggie had only brought a fraction of those men into

town with him. If the enemy's numbers were greater than anticipated, he would be at a huge disadvantage.

Meanwhile, the enemy was similarly panicked over the speed of Reggie's response. The plan had been to lure our men closer to the heart of the town before ambushing them all at once, yet our retreat had come sooner than they'd predicted.

In hopes of whittling down our numbers whatever little they could, arrows started to fly.

"Hurry!"

The cavalry galloped ahead while the stream of arrows was still sparse, making Reggie's safe getaway their top priority. It wasn't long before they had managed to escape the range of fire; however, just before the stone walls surrounding the town could come into view, their pace slowed to a stop.

"Lady Ada," Felix murmured.

Ada had come running from the entrance to the town. Once she spotted Reggie and his knights, she stood right in the middle of the road, blocking their path.

"What are *you* doing here?" Lord Azure asked, pulling out ahead of Reggie.

Ada ignored him, her gaze fixed intently on the prince. "Allow me to protect you, Your Grace. I can put a stop to this attack by Llewyrne and Salekhard... so won't you please choose to stay with me?" she asked.

Reggie furrowed his brow. As he signaled his knights behind his back, he responded, "And how exactly do you plan to manage that?"

"It's quite simple," she said, extending a hand. In an instant, the tree branch she was holding was engulfed in flame.

"She's a spellcaster?!"

Shocked as they were, Reggie's knights swiftly moved in to protect him. Ada only laughed at the sight of it. Flames slithered forward like a snake, licking the rooftop of a nearby house. The fire continued to spread to previously untouched homes. The smoke grew even thicker, dyeing the sky gray.



“Everything should be fine. Now that they know I’m here, the Salekhardians chasing after you will keep their distance.”

Ada took a step forward. The knights held their positions, and the soldiers who had only just caught up made to stand in her path, too. The blaze in Ada’s hand spat smaller bits of flame, which hit the ground in miniature explosions, drawing shrieks from the men.

When he saw that, Reggie motioned for the soldiers who had stepped out in front of him to fall back. “There’s no need to put your lives in danger. For the moment, at least, it seems all she wants is to talk to me.” Once he had instructed even his own knights to move out of the way, Reggie addressed Ada coolly. “What are your demands, then?”

“I’ve adored you for so long, dreaming of nothing but delivering you from certain death.”

“What are you hoping to protect me from, exactly?”

“Her Majesty has already eliminated her greatest obstacle to the throne: the king. So long as you come with me, she’s promised to spare your life,” Ada replied, her expression far from radiant. She was forcing a smile—almost like a little girl who feared she was about to be scolded, but hoped to somehow be forgiven regardless.

“So you were the queen’s pawn, hm?” Reggie muttered to himself. After whispering something into the ear of one of his knights, he responded, “Unfortunately for you, my life isn’t what I consider most precious to me. I’m not interested in anything you have to offer.”

“Then what *do* you want?! If I ask the queen, I’m sure she’ll—”

“I know someone who can’t live in peace until your master, her loyal count of Patriciél, and the viscount of Credias are all out of the picture,” he answered, claiming that person as his reason to fight.

Ada’s face twisted, on the verge of tears. “Yes, I realized as much. Then, at the very least, I ask that you die by my hand before anyone else can kill you. I shall follow soon after. This is the only path I have left now.”

The fire under Ada's control flared up, transforming into a vortex of flame around her. Soldiers screeched in fear, and one group even fled into the city. More screams soon echoed back from afar; most likely, they were under attack by the Llewynian soldiers laying siege to the area.

"Come up from behind and kill that spellcaster!" came an order.

Reggie's knights sprang into action, but one man leapt forward faster than the rest.

"Don't let up, my fellow Azurans! Protect His Highness at all costs!"

"Stay back, Marquis!" Reggie yelled.

Lord Azure ran forward, hiding his body behind his shield. Not even the prince's warning was enough to hold him back.

"You damned TRAITOR! You pawn of a foreign vixeen!"

Lord Azure had completely bought into her story. Unwitting though he had been, he must have deeply regretted that *he* was the one who had brought Ada—an enemy—all this way, and thus been desperate to somehow take responsibility for his actions.

He rushed in with a battle cry loud enough to sway the flames, and his shield almost seemed to repel the swirling fire. His soldiers followed close behind, surging forward in unison. The marquis' sword swung down as though cutting through an oncoming wave, but just as it was about to reach Ada, the flames burst with enough force to send shockwaves through the air.

The dozen men surrounding Ada were blown back as the flames coiled around them, their bodies slamming against the road or the walls of nearby houses. Lord Azure likewise hit the ground, only to be incinerated moments later, dead before he could even get out a scream. Both his sword and the iron that had once formed his shield were warped within the red flames, and his lifeless form was gradually dyed black.

The marquis' men shrieked. Reggie and his knights grimaced.

By the time the flames had died out, Lord Azure was so blackened and charred that it was impossible to tell who the body had once belonged to.

“It’s foolish to oppose a spellcaster with nothing but a sword. Particularly when you don’t have the element of surprise.” Ada didn’t appear the least bit repentant.

She extended the flames in her hand once more... only to give a frustrated click of her tongue.

For the second time now, she blew back the marquis’ knights. Watching their leader meet a grisly end had only seemed to stoke their fighting spirit; no matter how many of them she flung away, more and more soldiers and knights came swinging their swords at her. While her attention was occupied with that, Reggie and his knights vanished.

The majority of soldiers had disappeared into the town, too. Their actions had been hidden from sight both by the wall of flames Ada had built to protect herself and by the soldiers who had kept desperately throwing themselves at her.

“Why would he go that way? There are enemies there!”

Reggie had fled further into the town where the enemy was lurking. Rather than running toward danger, Ada had assumed he would go around her and make a break for the entrance to the town. She was stunned for a moment, but swiftly made to give chase.

However, her attempts were thwarted.

By the time she realized what was happening, there was a sword coming for her back. If she hadn’t noticed the shift in her flames, she would have been run through before she even knew what hit her.

Even so, Ada had no formal training as a soldier. She couldn’t quite manage to avoid the strike in time, and the sword ripped through her arm.

Still, this wasn’t Ada’s first time getting slashed on the battlefield. She set off a blast in the next instant, sending her attacker flying... and gasped.

Her victim had been Felix.

The knight was lying on his back along the road. His cape was scorched, and there were bright red burns all over his face. His arm had been roasted, left so



black that it was impossible to tell what was skin and what was charred clothing.

That was the state he'd been left in after forcing his way through the maelstrom of flames, all so he could attack Ada.

"But why?!"

Ada had assumed he'd fled together with Reggie. Before she knew what she was doing, she found herself rushing to Felix's side. He hadn't so much as twitched since he hit the ground, but the moment she knelt beside him, he reached out to grab Ada's wrist.

"I need you... to be a good girl and stay put. At least until His Highness gets away."

"Wha—why?! Why would you do that?! You nearly got yourself killed!"

"It was to protect His Highness. If you're going to kill me, go ahead."

"With those injuries, you're going to die whether I deal you a finishing blow or not!" Ada cried out, her voice catching in the back of her throat.

Felix responded, "If you were going to cry about it... you shouldn't have done it... in the first place..."

One would expect that reply to have sounded cold and indifferent. However, Felix's dying words didn't seem to betray any resentment toward Ada; he'd simply spoken them in his usual tone of voice.

Ada didn't say anything. Forgetting to so much as wipe away the tears that had welled up in her eyes, she merely hung her head in a daze.

And that was when I passed through the town's gates and saw the two of them there.



I had jumped into action not long before that. When we heard the sound of an explosion from within the town, everyone realized something had gone wrong.

"What?"

I cast a glance over my shoulder. Everyone around me turned their attention toward Liadna, too.

At some point, smoke had started rising in several places. I assumed the enemy soldiers had set fire to the town, but something didn't add up.

"Was the explosion really caused by the fire? It sounded kind of—"

Just as I was about to say "close," I heard another one. A chill ran down my spine. Reggie was somewhere inside that town—and he'd charged in with a scant number of men at that.

"Is His Highness alright?!"

"We must help him!"

The crowd around me started to clamor. I wanted to rush in just as badly as they did, but first, I asked Cain, "Could you please call for Gina and Girsch? They're with General Jerome."

Next, I closed my eyes and scanned the area for any magical presences. I couldn't act without making sure there were no spellcasters around first.

"Wait... why?"

What I felt directly north of us had to be Ada. Thus, I expected there to be one more presence inside the town, but I wasn't picking up on anything.

Meanwhile, I sensed several presences *outside* the walls. I detected mana in three different spots, and not one of them was all that far away. Were they hiding out, waiting for us to head into the town before they attacked?

"Oh no... Are there defective spellcasters here?"

"What's wrong, little disciple?"

"I'm getting tons of spellcaster-ish feedback. Three more, in addition to Ada," I explained.

"Yeah, those might be defectives," Master Horace muttered. "Hey, little disciple. You don't feel your mentor's constraints yet, do you?"

"No, not yet."

"In that case, you ought to head in a direction where there *aren't* any

spellcasters. Taking care of those guys should wait until after your soldiers have clashed with them and gleaned some information. Otherwise, you'll just be wasting your energy."

That meant I was better off going north, where Ada was the only one I sensed—in other words, into the town.

"Let's head into Liadna, Sir Cain!"

He checked with Alan. "Is that alright with you, milord?"

Alan nodded. "That's our only option here."

"I'm going, too!" Emmeline picked out a nearby squad from her Delphion troops, then started shouting commands.

There were enemies somewhere outside the town, too, but I had just spotted Jerome racing toward us, so he could handle that.

I placed my hands on a nearby patch of ground, formed five golems that were each twice the height of a grown adult, and had them lead the way into town. Cain and I, plus Emmeline and her squad of Delphion soldiers, followed close behind.

We were immediately assailed by white smoke and the stench of something burning. Due to the tall stone walls surrounding the town, there was little in the way of ventilation.

As we marched carefully through the lines of brick houses, we made an oblique turn on the path, only to stumble upon a familiar face.

Sparks were flying everywhere. Over a dozen soldiers were sprawled facedown along the road, and Ada was there kneeling next to one of them. The houses around her were burning more fiercely than any we'd seen thus far.

"Miss Ada!" I called out, and she snapped her head up to look at me.

She was crying. Yet instead of running toward us, she fled farther into the town.

I hadn't the slightest clue what had happened here, but checking on the unconscious soldiers came before anything else.

Just as I was about to do that, Cain gave a startled cry. “Felix?!”

After letting me down from his horse, he rushed over to Felix’s side. I hurried after him.

Felix was in awful shape. His cape had burned away to little but ash, and the back of his armor had been warped by the heat. Plus, he was too hot to touch. Per Cain’s instructions, one soldier poured the water from his canteen over Felix before removing his armor—which revealed that his back was red and blistering with burns.

Even worse than that was the right arm gripping his sword.

He appeared to have fallen unconscious; he didn’t respond no matter who called out to him.

I heard Emmeline shout, “Check for any survivors! Everyone else, stand guard!”

Once he had assessed the extent of Felix’s injuries, Cain lamented, “There’s nothing left to do but cut it off.”

“Wait!” I exclaimed. Maybe there was still something I could do. Hoping Cain would let me have a crack at it, I added, “Can you hold off for now? I might be able to heal some of this.”

“Heal it?” he parroted back.

I didn’t waste time elaborating. Instead, I cut a slash across my palm with the knife I’d been carrying, then touched his wounds with my bleeding hand.

Shutting my eyes, I felt out the flow of magic energy. First, I focused on my own. Next, I took that and gradually blended it into the mana that formed Felix’s body.

“Make sure you know your limits, kid. The last thing we need right now is for you to be down for the count.”

“I know, Master Horace.”

When my fingers were hurt, all it had taken to heal them was repairing the places where the flow of mana had stagnated. I hoped the same would apply to Felix’s wounds.

Felix's arm felt similar to the way my fingers had back then; in his case, there were simply far more points where his mana flow had been cut off. I linked all of those ends back together. After checking the results against the mana in my own arm, I finally opened my eyes to see if it had worked.

The formerly blackened bits of Felix's arm had been mended enough to look like flesh again. Given how red his skin was, he was still suffering light burns, but he was going to be just fine.

I let out the breath I'd been holding, suddenly realizing how dizzy I was. Perhaps I'd been too nervous to notice it until now.

Cain took a look at Felix's arm, then heaved a sigh of relief. "Now that I didn't expect. His arm swelled up from the inside, absorbing the blackened skin. Before I knew it, he was back to normal."

Now I finally knew how the healing process worked; it sounded like something similar to cell proliferation. I'd wondered if it was something like that when I fixed up my hands. Still, the thought of growing cells with magic seemed pretty weird to me.

"What should I do about his back?"

"Just leave it," Master Horace said. "Those burns can be fixed up with a salve. If you use too much more magic on him, the boy's body won't be able to take it. It won't do *you* any favors, either."

When I took a closer look, I noticed that the color had drained from Felix's face. It seemed that my spell had chipped away at *his* strength, too. Plus, Master Horace was right; if I healed him any more than this, I'd put myself out of commission just trying to patch him up. I couldn't have that—not when I still didn't know what had happened to Reggie.

We got to our feet and loaded Felix onto another knight's horse.

"I wonder what happened to Reggie and his knights. Did they get into a fight here, then escape through a different gate?" I pondered aloud.

"Miss Kiara!" came Emmeline's sudden shout. Having attended to the rest of the injured soldiers, she rushed over to me and Cain to announce, "Miss Ada was a spellcaster all along!"

“What?!”

For a moment, I nearly doubted my own ears. Ada was a *spellcaster*?

“His Highness caught on to an enemy ambush before it was too late. Just as he was doubling back, Ada stood in his path. She burnt down everything around her with her fire magic... including Lord Azure himself.” Emmeline pointed to a charred corpse near the side of the road.

*Ada... killed Lord Azure?*

I was having trouble processing all of this.

Master Horace muttered, “Guess the contract stone was there to fool us about her magical energy.”

I had to agree. There was no way all these half-dead allies of ours would frame Ada as the culprit if she hadn’t actually been involved. Plus, she had been the only one unharmed when I caught sight of her earlier.

The reason she’d run off into the town was because she’d been an enemy from the start. If you assumed that Salekhard and Llewyrne were her allies, everything suddenly made sense.

“His Highness got away from Ada. While Sir Felix and Lord Azure’s men were keeping her busy, he headed for the west gate.”

“The west gate?”

It was no surprise that Reggie had determined his only option was to get away from the spellcaster. However, what was waiting in the direction he had gone was only barely preferable to a confrontation with Ada. Judging by the look of things, there were even more enemies lurking in the town than we’d anticipated. Regardless, he must have figured that he had better odds of dealing with *them* than a mage.

Deep down, all I wanted was to rush straight to Reggie’s side. But given that Lord Credias could show up at any moment, there was a chance I would just get in the way if I wasn’t careful.

“The fires are too loud; we won’t be able to find him by following the sounds of sword fighting. I suggest we give up on looking for him,” Cain said.

I bit down on my lip, but deferred to his judgment. Taking Felix and a few other survivors with us, we left Liadna behind. It felt wrong to leave Lord Azure there, but I settled for entrusting his personal effects to Emmeline.

Gina and Girsch had been awaiting our return alongside Alan. Once we were out of the town, they rushed over to us.

“We need you to cool off some people ASAP, Gina!” I requested the moment we were face to face. We had to treat the burns on Felix’s back that I hadn’t gotten around to healing.

When she saw the condition he was in, Gina quickly slathered some salve over his burns, then had Reynard breathe puffs of cold air atop that.

Off to the side, Jerome, Alan, and Lord Enister had flocked over to Cain to get a rundown of the situation.

“That fool. How dare he kick the bucket before an old geezer like me,” Lord Enister bemoaned upon hearing of Lord Azure’s passing, closing his eyes for a few seconds. Given that the marquis had been his swordsmanship disciple, his death must have hit hard.

“We need to go rescue Reggie,” I said to myself.

The moment our forces were ready to start marching west, one of the soldiers who had been standing guard nearby came to us with a message. “We caught sight of the Salekhardian army to the south!”

Alan made his call right away. “General Jerome, take your men to the western side of the town and aid His Highness! Take the mercenaries with you just in case!” he ordered, leaving Reggie in Jerome’s hands.

“Understood!”

Jerome jumped into action immediately. Once Gina was done administering first aid to Felix, she and Girsch followed suit, just as Alan had requested.

As we watched them go, I said, “I should go with them, too.”

“Isn’t there a spellcaster who masqueraded as a hostage somewhere within the town?” Alan replied. “That means the odds are good that your archnemesis is there, too.”

He dismissed my offer out of hand. Well, of course he would. If we didn't make absolutely sure that Lord Credias wasn't there, there was a chance I wouldn't be of any use at all.

After a brief discussion with Lord Enister, Alan started issuing instructions to the Delphion troops. With the town to our backs, he stationed the Delphion soldiers to the right, a mix of Évrard and Azuran soldiers in the center, and the Enister soldiers to the left.

There were about 8,000 enemy soldiers incoming. Even excluding Jerome's troops, our numbers surpassed 10,000, so we still had the advantage here.

"The enemies in the town should have their hands full pursuing Reggie. I'll leave a lookout just in case, but don't waste too much attention on them," Alan ordered.

Meanwhile, I saw the Salekhardian army come into view. Their green capes blanketed the entirety of the road, about two carriages wide, and spread out past it to the surrounding trees and hills.

Was Isaac somewhere among them? My heart raced, drumming unpleasantly in my ears. My mind was already made up, however. If he stood before my eyes, I would attack him—for the sake of protecting my loved ones.

Perhaps he had noticed the uneasy look on my face; Alan shot me a wry smile and slapped me on the back. "You know how crafty Reggie can be. I'm sure he's handling himself just fine! If he already managed to give a spellcaster the slip, the rest should be a piece of cake."

"Ouch! Like I'm always telling you, Alan, I'm not wearing any chain mail! Go a little easier on me, would you?!"

"My mistake. You were looking glum, so I thought it might cheer you up. In any case, you should hang back and—"

"Wait. Let me head to the front."

Alan blinked, confused. Cain began to fret. "If we don't know where Lord Credias is, there's nothing you can do, Miss Kiara. You should wait until we've confirmed—"



“It’s a waste of time to sit here and wait. It would be faster to go find out for myself.”

Now that he’d guessed what I was getting at, Alan grinned. “Go ahead and crush those Salekhardians while you’re at it.”

I was going to get a preemptive strike. The first attack was always the easiest one to land—and thus the best time to get a critical hit.

“You’d better strike while the iron’s hot, little disciple. Eeeheehee!”

“I know!”

All fired up now, I made my golem. If I’d scooped out the earth right in front of the gate, it could have impeded Reggie’s escape, so I used dirt from a spot a short distance away.

The soil rose and took the form of a golem about a dozen mers tall, which slowly stood upright. Since there was a grove nearby, all the trees sticking out of its head and back made it look almost like it had been pelted with giant arrows, but that was the least of my concerns right now.

My golem barreled toward the lines of the Salekhardian army in one long stretch. The Salekhardians had clearly been anticipating an attack from the spellcaster; they immediately switched gears to retreat.

Of course, I had no intention of letting them get away. My golem jumped, soaring through the air. Just like plunging headfirst into a pool, it dove straight into the place the Salekhardians were running to just to the left of the road.

For that one moment, I had to keep my eyes shut.

The subsequent screams and tremors in the earth gave me a good guess as to how it had gone. Earth as solid as rocks had just come raining down upon them; there was no way anyone who had taken the hit had made it out alive.

“Delphion, to the right!” Alan commanded.

When I heard the thundering of hooves and feet as soldiers and cavalrymen ran past me on either side, I finally opened my eyes. The Salekhardian troops had been separated into two groups by the miniature mountain of dirt that was what remained of my golem. Alan had launched an attack on the right faction

without missing a beat.

Meanwhile, I realized: “I’m totally fine?”

I didn’t feel the slightest bit of interference from Lord Credias. In other words, he probably wasn’t with the Salekhardian troops. Did that mean the presence I had detected in the same direction as the Salekhardians was a defective spellcaster?

“Alan, there might be a defective spellcaster among Salekhard’s forces. I don’t think the viscount is there, either.”

“And that’s all we need to know.”

Alan gave orders to his runner, instructing him to relay them to Lord Enister. “I’m going to strike down Salekhard head-on. The count should wrap around from the left and—”

Someone interrupted him. “Pardon me! More Salekhardians just showed up about one thousand mers to the east! They number about five thousand!”

“What?!”

*Over there, too?!* I was just as surprised.

Alan swiftly modified his message for the runner. “Tell Lord Enister this: we need him to hold back the five thousand Salekhardian soldiers to the east. We’ll send the spellcaster his way, but if anything goes wrong, we may need her to retreat. For now, he should focus not on destroying their forces, but on driving them back. If it’s too much to do alone, he can pull back.”

He sent out a second messenger, too. “Inform General Jerome of the current situation, but make sure he knows that Reggie’s safe return is our number one priority.” After that, he turned back to me. “There may be even more Salekhardians troops waiting to ambush us. I need you to go back up Lord Enister so that we can put an end to this as quickly as possible.”

“Got it,” I responded with a nod. Cain helped me up onto his horse.



“The spellcaster’s safety is our top priority, Wentworth. Depending on the situation, we may need you to come back even if it means abandoning Lord Enister’s forces.”

Having said his piece, Alan disappeared into the charging waves of the Évrard army. Rather than playing the part of the stationary control tower, he always preferred getting at least one hit in for himself. Given how strong he was, I figured he’d be fine... but I was still worried.

I took off, praying for his safe return. It wasn’t long before Cain and I had caught up to Lord Enister. He was positioned right at the center of 4,000 cavalymen and foot soldiers, sitting proudly atop his giant goat, so he was easy to find.

Before I could even call out to him, he looked back over his shoulder. “Why, if it isn’t our Lady Spellcaster! I already got my orders from your messenger. What’s *your* plan here, little miss?”

“Just like earlier, I’m going to get the first hit in. I may be taken out of commission soon after that, so it would help if you told me what sort of spell you’d find most useful.”

Lord Enister hummed thoughtfully and faced forward once more, spending a few seconds mulling that over. “In that case, I’ll take a wall that can stop the enemy in their tracks.”

“Alright.”

A wall. If our goal was to carry out Alan’s instructions, that *was* our best bet.

When I caught a glimpse of Lord Enister’s goat, an idea suddenly occurred to me. By the time I was done explaining my plan to the count, the Salekhardians had come into sight just beyond the trees. Decked out in their green capes, the soldiers steadily marched across the gentle, mulch-covered slope.

Standing beside Lord Enister, who had brought his troops to a halt, I slammed my hands down on the ground and cast my magic.

“C’mon, let’s see a wall! Now with added steps!”

The earth rose up, blocking the Salekhardians’ path. Building in stairs had

made the wall deeper and harder to tear down; plus, it forced the enemy to split up into two groups. I could see from over the wall that the Salekhardians had stopped their march, perplexed by its sudden emergence.

“Split up into two groups! One should follow me!” Lord Enister called out to the soldiers and knights under his command. Leading one half of the troops, he sprinted up the stairs, gaining more and more momentum until he finally leapt down to the other side of the wall. I heard the roars, shrieks, and clashing of swords that followed.

An old man riding a giant goat had just descended from above, leading the enemy vanguard. In the face of this newest assault, the Salekhardians had apparently been too stunned to so much as fire off their arrows. It sounded like they were being subjected to a one-sided beatdown.

The remaining Enister troops proceeded to the left. Over on the right-hand side, I supplemented our attack with a little extra dash of magic. I created several more giant, earthen walls, aimed them at the Salekhardians, and let them drop. I was a little out of breath afterward, but I was confident I’d intimidated them enough to hold them back.

Sure enough, the Salekhardian forces on the right side of the wall had grown thin—but just as I was thinking that, several Salekhardians came running in my direction, screaming in fear.

“Why are they coming *this* way?”

The reason soon became clear.

The feet of one of the last soldiers to come running had turned into sand. After collapsing on the spot, the rest of his body soon crumbled to dust. What’s more, even the very ground underneath him had begun dissolving into sand. All the Salekhardian soldiers caught in the blast radius likewise toppled over and disintegrated.

Standing at the very center of the sandpit was a defective spellcaster... and an earth one, at that.

“We need to stop him, Sir Cain!”

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m still holding up just fine! And I haven’t felt any interference so far!”

I concluded that the magical presence I’d detected earlier must have been this defective spellcaster.

I made another golem, this one about three mers tall.

“I’ll go just in case,” Cain said before dismounting his horse, leaving me to sit atop it. He then ran off to go kill the defective spellcaster himself.

That was when one of the soldiers who had been running from the defective suddenly collapsed on the spot. “We were all duped... Why?!” he screamed as he writhed in pain. The wind whirled about with each thrash of his limbs.

“Sir Cain!”

The wind scattered around, slicing the surrounding ground to ribbons. Whenever a gust had made it about ten mers, it suddenly died down. That was the full range of the spell, most likely.

Unfortunately, Cain was well within that range. Several strands of wind rushed toward him.

Despite ducking down as fast as he could, his left sleeve was torn and a large rip appeared down his blue cape. Luckily, the combination of his armor and his sword, which he’d held up in front of him like a shield, had prevented him from taking too much damage.

Weaving through the gaps in the wind, Cain drew close to the newest defective spellcaster. He brought an end to the man’s life in an instant, leaving him to crumble away into sand.

Meanwhile, the soldier using earth magic was hard at work destroying the surrounding trees and even the wall I’d made. Perhaps the other Salekhardians had decided to let him do the heavy lifting here; they didn’t draw any closer. That part actually worked in my favor, but at this rate, we were going to lose the wall that was holding them back. The nearby knights of Lord Enister’s couldn’t get any closer either, for fear that their horses’ hooves would get caught in the sand.

I dismounted my horse and prepared to make my next move, only to hear:

“Don’t you dare cower in the face of *this*, you maggots!”

A bearded old man riding a white goat—Lord Enister, who else?—came barreling into view. When had *he* turned back around?

Lord Enister threw his spear from atop his goat. With a *whoosh*, it cut through the air and ran the defective spellcaster straight through. The defective crumbled into sand, subsumed into the surroundings until he was no longer identifiable.

“Are you alright, knight of Évrard?” Lord Enister called out to Cain.

Cain, however, was preoccupied with something else. “Come look at this, Lord Enister!”

The goat once again leapt down from the wall, after which Lord Enister dismounted and rushed over to Cain’s side. Cain was holding up the leftover clothes of the soldier who had been shooting blades of wind. Lord Enister took a look at it, furrowing his brow.

“A disguise, hm?”

*A what?*

“This was a Llewynian soldier. The structure of his armor is different from a Salekhardian’s.”

*A Llewynian soldier? Wait, are these Llewynian troops?!*

I glanced around. I had relaxed after we killed the defective spellcaster, assuming that had been the presence I’d felt earlier, but this meant that Lord Credias might actually be here somewhere.

Just then, my eyes were drawn to a certain spot. There, I saw a squad of men in green capes, approaching us as they detoured around the sandpit. There were about a hundred of them, by my estimation. I recognized one of the men on horseback, positioned toward the rear.

“Ah...”

I felt the blood drain from my face as I was struck with a sudden lethargy. I slumped against my horse’s neck, and it took all my energy just to support my own weight.

“Sir Cai—” I tried to call out to him, but I could barely get the words out. Regardless, it wasn’t long before Cain and Lord Enister noticed the enemy squad.

“So they’re here now that the worst of the danger has passed,” Lord Enister muttered.

Cain held his sword at the ready. Lord Enister grabbed the spear fastened to a nearby horse, grumbling thoughtfully. “Isn’t that the viscount suspected of sorcery?” he asked.

“Credias?” Cain whipped around to look at me as soon as he’d uttered the name, his expression turning grim. “Miss Kiara!” Now that he’d noticed the condition I was in, he came running over.

I couldn’t take my eyes off of Lord Credias, too nervous about what magic he might unleash upon us.

His face had grown even chubbier since the last time I’d seen him. That made his frog-like eyes pop out a little bit less than they used to, but there was no mistaking who he was. Who else could have such distinctive features?

Eventually, I saw his mouth moving.

I didn’t know how to read lips. Still, I had the feeling I knew exactly what he’d just said.

*Found you.*



## Side Story: Flustered on a Full Moon Night

“Target acquired. He’s moving toward the stairs.” I cracked open the door to the room I’d just thrown myself into, gazing out at the end of the corridor.

The silver hair and long, blue cape swaying behind his back receded farther and farther down the hallway. Reggie had perfect poise, so even the mere sight of him walking was beautiful enough to inspire envy.

Normally, I would have called out to him, but not today.

Before long, Reggie disappeared down the stairs, none the wiser to how I had watched him leave with bated breath.

After I heaved a sigh of relief, the two soldiers who had come walking down the hall shot me curious glances. “Lady Spellcaster?”

Both of the soldiers, who were evidently on patrol, looked completely lost.

“Thanks for staying quiet. Let’s keep this our little secret, okay?”

“Yes, milady.”

When our eyes met earlier, I had put a finger to my lips, after which the pair hadn’t uttered a word. Once I’d thanked them for their discretion, I exited the room and made my way down the corridor.

“What was *that* all about?”

“Was she performing some magic ritual she didn’t want anyone to see?”

Bits of the soldiers’ conversation reached my ears. I’d definitely given them the wrong idea here, but I wasn’t concerned about that. What mattered most right now was that I didn’t get anywhere near Reggie.

Why, you ask? Because things were still awkward between us—you know, after the kiss the other day. I was still distressed enough that whenever I walked around holding Master Horace, wind would start blowing everywhere each time memories of the incident came flooding back to me.

Master Horace found that to be a riot. He kept chasing after me while cackling to himself, so I had left my chambers to wander around the castle. If I could just make myself a little sleepier, the drowsiness would drown out the embarrassment, even if Master Horace crept up to me again.

While I was on that stroll to wear myself out, I'd nearly had an encounter with Reggie himself. Before I even knew what I was doing, I'd run for cover.

After confirming that Reggie had gone down the stairs, I decided to head up to the third floor. Once I'd reached the top of the steps, I saw a door in the shape of an arch, which I then opened.

It opened up onto a vast balcony. There were plenty of tables lined up there, and it was a big enough space for almost a hundred people to partake in tea together. Along the parapet was a gorgeous handrail chiseled with sleek grooves.

Nobody else was there. Our lookouts were stationed in either taller towers or the bulwark that covered the entire periphery of the castle, so there was probably no need to have one here.

I leaned against the handrail, gazing up at the midnight blue sky that stretched as far as the eye could see. Thanks to the light of the full moon, it was a little brighter out than usual.

I held my right hand up to the sky, hiding the moon behind my fingers. On one of those fingers, I was wearing a ring. In the darkness, the stone's color looked deeper and darker than ever—just one more way it was similar to Reggie's eyes.

I'd always thought rings were beautiful, but I never imagined I'd be so shocked when I was finally given one. That reaction made sense, though; rather than a simple accessory, I'd always envisioned it as something symbolic of a promise. Reggie had told me I was allowed to sell it, but I wouldn't dream of doing anything like that. In fact, I was so terrified of losing it that I never took it off.

"I'm not really sure what I want here."

Just as I sighed, I heard a door to the balcony open. Judging by where the

sound was coming from, it wasn't the same one I'd used to get out here.

My first instinct was to hide, but all I did was crouch down on the spot.

*Wait, anyone could see me like this!*

Right as I was about to transmute the stone floor in a panic, the mystery person called out to me. "What, are you feeling ill?"

"Wha?!"

When I glanced back over my shoulder, I saw it was Alan who had joined me on the balcony. Breathing a sigh of relief, I rested my head against my knees.

*Thank God it wasn't Reggie.*

"Hey, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I thought you were Reggie for a second there," I said as I rose to my feet.

Now it was Alan's turn to sigh. "Yes, I heard you were avoiding Reggie. I think his feelings were a little hurt, you know."

"Urk..."

*Of course Reggie noticed.*

I'd eaten breakfast at a different time today and made sure I didn't see him after that. Perhaps he'd spotted me making a break for it when we were about to run into each other.

"What on earth would drive you to do that?" Alan asked.

His interrogation only left me more and more stuck for words. I couldn't tell him the truth.

That was when Alan came up beside me, placing his hands next to mine on the handrail. "I suppose I can take a guess as to what has you so stressed. It's that ring, isn't it? I'm betting Reggie gave it to you."

He pointed to my right hand, and I gave a start. Alan had probably been there when the merchant gave Reggie the ring.

"Um... yeah. Reggie gave it to me the day before yesterday. He said a merchant gave it to him as a gift."

“Reggie refused everything else the man offered, claiming that we shouldn’t take on extra luggage when we’re always on the move. The ‘add the cost to your donation instead’ was implied. That ring was the one gift he accepted, so I was wondering what he wanted it for... but now I see. So he wanted to give it to you.”

My eyes flew open in surprise. *This was the only thing he accepted? Here I’d thought it was just one of the many gifts he received.*

If his plan was to give me something, why did he choose this? The blue gem bore such a strong resemblance to his eyes. When I considered the implications of him giving me a jewel of the same color as his irises, a color so strongly associated with himself... I could practically feel the blood rushing to my head.

*What do I do? I’m so happy!*

Part of me wanted to clutch the ring as tightly as I could, but I stopped myself from doing that in front of Alan.

“Say, Kiara.”

“Yes?”

“How do you feel about Reggie and Wentworth?”

What a tremendous bomb he’d just dropped on me.

“What? Um...”

*Wait, he’s asking me about Cain, too?! That makes it even harder to answer!*

My kiss with Reggie may have been an accident, but the question reminded me that Cain had declared his love for me right to my face. If I said something wrong and it got back to the man himself, I wouldn’t know what to do. My only hope was to desperately search for a way out of this conversation.

“W-Wh-What do you mean by—”

“What kind of relationship do you want from them, I guess? Or maybe... which one do you like more?”

“Eep!”

Alan’s clarification was terrifyingly blunt. He might as well have nailed me

right in the face with a ball.

*Why is he being so pushy today of all days?! Usually he never asks me anything! Yeah, that's right... Isn't Alan acting a little strangely?*

"Can I ask why you want to know?"

"Wentworth hugged you, didn't he? Sometime around noon yesterday."

"Ulp."

"Reggie saw it happen."

"He was watching?!" I clutched my head in my hands.

I was going to die of embarrassment. Plus, I was feeling deeply anxious all of sudden.

What had Reggie thought when he saw it? Since I didn't push him away, had he assumed I was receptive to Cain's advances? But that was only because Cain had been in so much pain; plus, if I'd struggled against him, I had the feeling it would've just made things worse. After all, Cain seemed like the type to get more hung up on me the more I pushed him away.

Besides, Reggie was the one who had normalized getting touched and hugged for me. It didn't even faze me at this point.

Perhaps *that* was why he'd become such a calming presence for me, almost like family.

It was only natural to have him by my side, and I grew lonely whenever he wasn't there. Yet even if he went somewhere far away, I could still believe that he hadn't turned his back on me.

"So, which one will it be? Perhaps I have no right to say anything, but just watching the lot of you gives me a stomachache," Alan said, massaging his belly.

Panicked, I lifted my face. "I'm not really sure how to answer that! Reggie is just my keeper, and Cain might as well be a second guardian to me. Besides, he told me to sell the ring if I got into any trouble!" I babbled, instinctively hiding my right hand behind my back.

Had he only told me I could sell it because he was afraid I wouldn't accept it

otherwise? Or was I reading too far into the whole thing? But otherwise, what was the point of picking out this one specific thing to give to me?

*He probably wanted to convey that he was looking out for me like family, right?*

As I was mulling it all over, I averted my gaze from Alan.

“Still your keeper, hm?” He heaved a sigh, then muttered under his breath, “You told her to *sell* it? Reggie, you ass.”

Judging by that remark, I was pretty sure he’d gotten the picture... or had he?

For the moment, there wasn’t much more of an answer I could give him. It was hard to put what I felt for Reggie into words. When it came to Cain, I didn’t want to tell anyone else about the troubles he’d revealed to me in confidence.

I fell silent for a bit, until Alan suddenly asked, “What about me, then?”

“Huh?” I gave a puzzled tilt of my head. Had all this talk made him curious about how I saw him?

His anticipation obviously building, Alan went on, “I’d say I’m like an older brother to you, wouldn’t you? Try calling me ‘brother dearest,’ if you like!”

Unfortunately, I found that suggestion a little hard to agree with. “Sorry, but you’re definitely more of a little brother type.”

“Why?! I’m older than you!”

True. He was the same age as Reggie, even. He sure didn’t *feel* older than me, though.

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s just the vibe you give off? You seem kind of innocent, in a way.”

It was as I said this that it occurred to me: Game-Alan had a much more mature aura about him. Of course, that was because he’d lost his father to rely on, and he’d had to support his mother all on his own.

“Calling me a younger brother is a bit much, though.”

“That’s just how you come off to me. I mean, think about it! Miss Emmeline’s the same age as you, but don’t you think she seems more mature?”

“Oh, that kindred spirit of yours.”

Why did he keep referring to us like birds of a feather? I was pretty sure Emmeline was one of a kind. I could never threaten an enemy soldier the way she had.

“Then what about Miss Ada? Doesn’t she feel older than you? And she’s only got one year on me, too. It feels perfectly natural to see her standing side by side with Sir Felix, but when she’s next to you, she seems way more adult in comparison.”

For some reason, Alan shot me a wary look. “This is a trap, isn’t it?”

“What are you talking about?”

Why would he jump to that conclusion? Despite my dumbfounded look, Alan just cast a cautious glance toward the door before saying, “You’re never supposed to answer a question like that from a woman. If we keep this line of conversation going, nine times out of ten, the girl in question is going to be hanging around somewhere nearby, and she’ll put me through the wringer for overestimating her age.”

He puffed out his chest, clearly proud of his knowledge. I was too stunned to reply, so Alan just continued his lecture. “If I *only* say that Ada looks mature, that’s one thing. What’s dangerous is saying that you—who’s just one year her junior—look young in the same conversation. Therefore, I decline to comment.”

Honestly, I was amazed that Alan was actually savvy to these subtleties.

“Wait... Did a girl give you a hard time because you mistook her age once?”

“I’ve always kept this lesson close to my heart, so I’ve never gotten into trouble myself. I *have* seen Chester start making guesses as to the ages of my mother’s attendants, Maya and Clara. The poor man nearly got himself killed for it.”

“Who taught you all that, then?”

The moment after the question left my lips, I glanced behind Alan and nearly clamped a hand over my mouth.

As Alan had yet to notice anything, he answered, “It was Went—”

“What about me, milord?” Cain asked, placing a hand on his shoulder from behind.

“Gah!” Alan was surprised enough to give a start, shaking off the knight’s hand in the process. “Wentworth?! What are you doing here?!”

“I saw that Miss Kiara was out here. I came to tell her not to roam the castle at night.”

“I wasn’t *roaming*.”

I was about to retort, *I’m not some senile old woman, Sir Cain*, but arguing back seemed akin to poking at a hornet’s nest, so I kept my mouth shut.

“And then, wouldn’t you know it, I overheard Lord Alan telling a *fascinating* story. Tell me, what exactly did I teach you?”

With a gulp, Alan worked up the nerve to blurt out, “H-How to treat women!”

I shot Cain a sideways glance. Perhaps my dubious feelings showed on my face, judging by the way he rushed to explain himself. “Don’t phrase it like that, milord! That is to say... I felt that the way Chester and Lord Alan treated women wasn’t proper, so I thought to rectify the issue—”

Just as he was in the midst of making excuses, Alan cut him off. “True, I suppose you *could* call it a remedial lesson. Wentworth taught me what not to say to a woman, you see!”

“What else did he tell you, specifically?”

“Aside from the age thing, he told us never to comment on her breasts.”

I looked back at Cain again. “You’re a bad role model, Sir Cain.”

My expression must have looked pretty frosty there; he was obviously shaken. “Why are you telling her this, milord?!”

“Why would you teach him all that? What makes Alan so fun is that he’s too pure to know any of this stuff.”

“That’s the wrong objection to make here, Miss Kiara!”

“Hey, Kiara, what’s that supposed to mean?!”

As I watched the duo grow more and more flustered, I let slip a laugh. That



seemed to snap Cain back to his senses.

“If there’s any lesson I could teach, I’d like to instill it upon *you* to be a bit more cautious, Miss Kiara. There are plenty of female servants in the castle, so I suppose there isn’t too much to worry about... but you wandered around Fort Inion by yourself, too, didn’t you?”

The muscles in my face stiffened. *I didn’t think he’d seen that! How does he know?!*

One night when I was thinking too hard about Isaac and couldn’t get to sleep, I’d turned around on my way to go see the frostfoxes and went on a walk across the parapet to clear my head.

“It turned out fine, now didn’t it?”

“Is that right?” Cain said, before striding right up to me to scoop me up.

“What the...? What are you doing, Sir Cain?!”

“If someone picks you up, you can’t use your magic, now can you? A girl as light as you ought to be doubly mindful of that risk.”

Hearing him call me “light” only made me all the more embarrassed.

“Um, please put me—”

“Not until you reflect on your actions.”

“But this is so embarrassing!”

*Even Alan looks taken aback! He’s gaping at us with a face like he’d rather be anywhere else!*

“I always lift you up when we ride a horse together, so it’s a bit late to get shy about it now,” he replied nonchalantly, before bringing his lips close to my ear. “Or will treating you more like a grown woman make you a little extra remorseful?”

His breath ghosted over my ear. *No, wait... This is more than just his breath! It tickles too much! Don’t tell me he just—?!*

“Ahhhhh! I’d rather just stay a child, thanks! Good night!” I squealed, struggling in his arms.

The moment Cain put me down in surprise, I dashed off like a rabbit. Keeping up that momentum, I ran back inside the castle from the balcony, sprinted down the corridor, and rushed down the stairs multiple steps at a time.

“Waaaah! Why would he do that?!”

*Why did he have to kiss my ear?!*

Worst of all, Alan had been watching the whole thing. His expression had gone stiff, but he’d left his eyes wide open.

“This is SO embarrassing!”

That was all I could think about. Desperate to escape these niggling emotions, I pushed my legs as fast as they could go, heading out into the garden of the manor.

Seeing as I’d just run a full-out sprint, I had to stop and wheeze for air. I wandered all the way over to a nearby flowerbed, taking a seat there to rest.

At the very least, after all that running, I no longer felt like tearing my hair out.

That had really been too much. I’d always feared that Cain wouldn’t listen if I asked him to wait, and it turned out I’d been right on the money. If he’d managed to keep me in his clutches like that, he probably would have bullied me until I gave in.

Once I’d finally calmed down, I heard the footsteps of someone walking through the garden. Just as I was wondering who it could be, I spotted a few silver locks of hair past a shrub bedecked with white blossoms.

Standing up in a panic, I made to escape into the garden ASAP. Unfortunately, I was still exhausted from all the sprinting I’d just done, and my legs wobbled underneath me. Just as I was stumbling along like a drunkard, someone suddenly grabbed me by the wrist, flipped me around with ease, and pulled me into a hug.

Even in the dim light, I recognized the pale jacket before my eyes. I caught a whiff of that sweet, familiar scent that both gave me the jitters and put me at ease. It was Reggie. He must have spotted me and chased me down.

“I found you, Kiara.”

With the way my face was pressed up against him, I could feel his voice reverberate in his chest. I found myself closing my eyes to listen.



Reggie just giggled and said, “You’ve been avoiding me all day today, I see. Does that mean you’re afraid of a scolding because you did something naughty?”

Drat. I’d relaxed out of habit, but I’d forgotten that he was the one I’d been running from in the first place. Now he had me in his clutches, and I had nowhere to run.

For now, I was better off playing dumb. “Of course not!”

“Then why were you running from me?”

*I can’t just say, “I get embarrassed every time I think about our kiss!”*

While I struggled for words, I could sense that Reggie was peering down at the top of my head. Caving under the pressure, I came up with a truly pathetic excuse. “I was, um, scared.”

“Have I ever done something to frighten you?”

“No, but still...”

In truth, there had been no need to run away. Still, the sheer embarrassment of it all had made me afraid to look Reggie in the eyes.

“Does it scare you even to talk?” Still stuck for words, I nodded. Reggie then said, “Do you want me to tell you something that’s really scary?”

Reggie removed his hands from my back and head, reaching out to cup my face. When I looked up at him, I caught a glimpse of his mischievous smile, and soon I found myself shutting my eyes. Then, the moment I *really* thought I was in trouble...

I felt him place a kiss on my forehead.

Even so, I couldn’t force myself to run. I couldn’t even think to tell him off. I was at a total loss, feeling like I must have lost my mind.

“You won’t run?”

When I opened my eyes, I saw that the teasing glint had vanished from Reggie’s eyes. That terrified me, but it also told me how serious this was.

It was like there was a predator who wanted to devour me whole right before

my eyes, but I couldn't will myself to flee. My own feelings—the way I didn't even care if I got caught—shook me to my core.

Was it because I knew Reggie would never actually do anything I didn't want? Or was it because even now, part of me assumed he was just teasing me?

It felt as though Reggie's blue eyes could see straight through to what I was thinking, and my face grew hot with shame. "No, um... Don't look at me..."

When I hung my head to hide my face, Reggie grew unusually flustered. "Kiara? Erm... I'm sorry. Are you crying?"

"No... I just don't want you to see my face."

Reggie hugged me one more time—as though to hide me away in his arms.

"I'm sorry. You were trying so hard to give me the slip that I wondered if I'd done something to make you hate me. I suppose I got a little mean about it."

Our current pose was embarrassing in a different way, but at least it meant that Reggie couldn't see my expression. Relieved, I responded, "Um, I'm sorry as well. I ran away from you the other day, too, when we bumped into each other after you'd been hiding from Miss Ada. You didn't seem happy about it, so I just got really anxious. Even today, I couldn't stop myself from running away." Incoherent as it was, I apologized for my behavior.

"Oh, I see. Here I'd assumed you were just unhappy about it," Reggie muttered, as though a piece of a puzzle had fallen into place. He then patted me on the head. "For me, it was more like an unexpected stroke of luck."

"What?"

Hearing that he'd been thinking about it that way, I felt the heat gather in my face all over again.

*If he's calling it good luck, does that mean it didn't bother him?*

"After all, it's a good thing our lips didn't crash together right as you fell down. If *that* had happened, both our mouths would've been left a bloody mess, and you would have felt a little worse about it than just awkward. You'd have been writhing around in pain, I imagine."

"Oh, you might be right there."

If our lips had met during the fall, the pull of gravity would've turned the little incident into a complete disaster. A bit of blood spilled would be one thing, but it would've been awful if we'd managed to chip our teeth.

"Thinking about it from that perspective, it was but a trivial accident. Wouldn't you say so?" Reggie pulled away from me, peering into my face and seeking my agreement.

I automatically nodded. At the very least, I was grateful that we hadn't gushed blood from our mouths, only to be forced to explain *why* to Groul and the other knights.

Reggie flashed me a smile, even fainter than the light of the full moon overhead. It was contagious; I smiled right back at him.

*Oh! I can finally look Reggie in the eyes without wanting to run.*

"Now, we'd best head back to our rooms," Reggie said, dragging me all the way back to my chambers.

Master Horace was still intent on teasing me, but I was much calmer now than I'd been earlier in the day. He griped, "You're no fun," but I simply ignored him and went to sleep. All that mattered was that I could show my face around Reggie again—though I still felt embarrassed whenever I thought about the ring.

However, I got the feeling that a moment of reckoning was steadily drawing near—the moment when I would no longer be able to call him my guardian. The moment when I'd have no choice but to regard him as any other man.

The thought made me lonely and desolate, and I was terrified of what was going to become of me... so I just pretended like I hadn't noticed, delaying that moment for as long as I possibly could.

## Afterword

Kanata Satsuki here! Thank you for reading *I Refuse to Be Your Enemy!* 4. We've finally made it to the fourth volume! It's all thanks to my faithful readers that the story has gotten this far.

After running all over Delphion, Kiara and friends have finally made it to the province of Trisphede. Plenty of incidents occur that shake Kiara up in a big way. Why can't she help but deny something that she knows deep down? Why can't she simply accept it? It's when she arrives at those answers that the romantic subplot will finally reach its conclusion. I hope you enjoy the process of getting there.

Just like the previous volumes, the print version includes several additions and edits to what was posted online. The side story covers the aftermath of a certain incident in Delphion Castle, and I made sure it was chock-full of romance. I had fun writing about Kiara running from place to place, and I shone a little spotlight on poor Alan, who's going to get an ulcer from all the drama unfolding around him.

Moving on, I would once again like to extend my thanks to my wonderful editor.

The cover encapsulates this volume perfectly! Which is precisely what I asked of my illustrator, Mitsuya Fuji. For the color illustration, she drew the trio of girls all dressed up for the festival. I wasn't sure if I should have made that a regular insert illustration or not, but looking at the color version of it now, I'm glad I decided to go with this.

I mostly requested scenes on the battlefield and a lot of moments that were otherwise hard to capture, but I'm really pleased with the climactic feel of everything! My favorite insert illustration is the second one. The way Kiara smiles so tranquilly the moment their eyes meet made my heart skip a beat. I hope you all spent as much of the volume grinning as I did!

I'd also like to thank the editing department at Shufu to Seikatsu Sha—the



proofreaders, the printers, and everyone else who helped get this book published. And finally, I'd like to extend my gratitude to all my dear readers.

As an additional note, I'll be publishing a short story online as thanks for purchasing this volume. I'll be uploading it to my blog on *Shousetsuka ni Narou*. I hope you enjoy it.

—Kanata Satsuki, October 2016

# Bonus Short Story

## The Reason He Confessed

That day, Cain had run into Kiara in the gardens of Delphion Castle.

It was safe inside the walls, so he didn't typically accompany her around the premises. Being a teenage girl, so long as she wasn't in any danger, she likely didn't want a man hanging around her 24/7. Once he'd finished up his morning training and breakfast with the other knights of Évrard, he'd simply gone to check up on Kiara upon hearing she was in the garden.

He wasn't terribly surprised when he spotted her in the gazebo. She always *had* preferred sitting still over roaming around. When she found the perfect place to settle down, she'd probably made herself comfortable there.

Upon drawing closer, he saw that she'd fallen fast asleep. Her head rested against one of the white pillars, exposing her defenseless sleeping face for anyone to see. Now *this* was a rare sight; had she stayed up too late the previous night?

As Cain peered into Kiara's face, which hadn't quite outgrown childhood yet, he noticed dark circles under her eyes. He lowered his hand, stopping himself before he instinctively reached out to touch them... and when he dropped his gaze, he spotted something he hadn't seen before.

Kiara almost never wore accessories, yet on one of her fingers, there sat the perfect fit of a silver ring. The moment he saw its tiny, blue gemstone, he thought of Prince Reginald's eyes.

"So it was His Highness."

Reginald had to have been the one to give it to her. Who else would be brazen enough to bestow jewelry upon the girl? The prince cherished his spellcaster like none other. If another man gave her a gift that plainly spelled out his feelings, there was no telling what kind of trouble he might get himself

into. Besides, Kiara wouldn't have accepted it in the first place.

Cain brushed his fingers against hers, and still she didn't wake up.

"Is this the reason she didn't sleep?"

Of course she'd fret over it, even if it was the prince who had given it to her. She was only conscious of her familial feelings toward him; whenever he treated her like a lover, she never knew how to take it.

Now that the prince had beaten him to the punch, Cain wondered if he ought to have given her something, too. While he'd considered it on the day of the festival, he had ultimately discarded the idea, worried it might make her shy away from him again. He regretted that decision now.

"If only I'd given her something..."

If he'd told her it was a token of familial affection, she would have accepted it. She was a lonely girl, after all. Even knowing that Cain was out to use her, she'd never tried to cut him loose. Cain was delighted by that state of affairs; it helped him believe that she would never leave him.

That was exactly why the ring unsettled him.

He hated watching her sleep with that accessory on so much that he reached out to wake her up. During the ensuing conversation, he couldn't help bringing up the ring—and that was exactly what he shouldn't have done.

Tripped up by Cain's questioning, it didn't take long for Kiara to admit that the gift was from Reginald. Hearing her say it only caused his frustration to grow.

Considering she had left the ring on her finger, he worried that it wouldn't be long before she left him for Reginald. Perhaps the reason Cain placed a kiss on the same hand was because he wanted her to think of *him* every time she looked at it. Of course, he'd known the gesture was bound to send Kiara running.

And yet, she didn't go anywhere. When she claimed she hadn't minded it, Cain felt relieved.

*She'll stay by my side. She won't leave me behind yet.*

He'd wallowed in his regrets and dwelled on revenge for so many years; Kiara,

who always looked forward no matter how much remorse she felt, was far stronger than he was. Sometimes she might wish she could do something over, but she never let herself grow fixated on it. Without ever losing sight of her goal, she could still keep on mourning fallen enemy soldiers. Considering the standstill *he* was stuck in, he'd always suspected that Kiara was walking far ahead of him along their path.

She simply pitied him, and thus she would stop to look back at him every now and then.

The realization had made him feel truly pathetic. He'd tried to convince himself that her earnestness was a product of her youth and nothing more.

Still, the part of him that pined for her whispered, *Just admit it*. If he gave up and exposed to Kiara how pitiful he really was, she would be even less inclined to turn her back on him. Those feelings spilled out, leading him to say, "I'm afraid you'll leave me behind."

Kiara promised not to abandon him, but she'd framed it as an obligation to him. He didn't like that; he could never be satisfied with such a distant relationship.

And so, he confessed the truth: *I love you*.

The reason he didn't press her to respond was because he didn't want to hear her answer yet—not until Cain himself was prepared to leave her side. Instead, he told her that she *did* need to order him. Given how heavy her sense of responsibility was, she would never forget that she'd done it.

Kiara always hated bossing people around. She was hesitant at first, but eventually she did as he'd asked.

When he heard her reluctant command, Cain was reassured. *With this, she'll be by my side for some time to come*.







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I Refuse to Be Your Enemy! Volume 4

by Kanata Satsuki

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